RANORMAL'S LOVE: BOOK FIFTEEN CLAIMING THE HUNTER

Into the Paranormal World: To everything there is a season, including a time to lay down arms and to love.

Jeremiah Tully lost his sister when a shifter attacked them while camping with friends. He blames himself... and rogues, believing they are a danger to society. When he finds a group of like-minded people who call themselves hunters, he joins up and spends three years helping them hunt, capture, and sometimes even kill shifters and vampires. Then a few new guys show up, telling tales of demons, and how they want help capturing some. Jeremiah doesn't believe their tales, but when the demons attack, Jeremiah quickly turns into a believer. He flees the building, but then is chased down by one of the monsters when he crashes his dirt bike. When he wakes in some kind of clinic run by gargoyles, he thinks he's a dead man. Instead, he learns that some humans live side by side with the gargoyles as mates, and one of the gargoyles, Grateman, is claiming him. While Jeremiah realizes he does have an odd attraction to Grateman, can a mating between a gargoyle and a hunter really work?

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Claiming the Hunter A Paranormal's Love: Book Fifteen

By

Charlie Richards

Dedication

To goals—set them, then don't give up.

Chapter One

"Do you believe them?"

Jeremiah Tully lifted his left brow at the other man as he bent to pick up a box. Grunting upon feeling the weight—he must have found a box full of canned goods, because it was fucking heavy—he turned away. As Jeremiah headed out of the box truck's bed, he grumbled, "As if we need more to deal with than were-creatures and vampires."

"Come on, Jer," Quinn called. "You must have some opinion."

Glancing over his shoulder, Jeremiah watched Quinn pick up a box and hustle after him. Judging from the fact that he stood six-foot-one and his fellow worker stood five-foot-ten, not to mention Jeremiah had thirty pounds, all muscle, on the man, he figured Quinn must have found a light box. His sort-of friend easily closed the distance between them.

"Look," Jeremiah stated, setting his box down and pulling his box cutter from his belt. "I don't want to call anyone a liar, okay?"

Jeremiah sliced through the tape holding the box's flaps shut. Opening it, he reached in and pulled out a jar.

Canned peaches. Yep. Food for the kitchen.

"But you do think Paris is full of shit, right," Quinn pressed, setting down his own box nearby, so he could check the contents.

"In my opinion," Jeremiah continued as he slid the cutter back onto the clip at his belt and turned to look at Quinn. "I think Paris and his buddies just got a little over excited while out hunting. They saw a bear shifter and a bird shifter too close together and jumped to conclusions."

Jeremiah reached for the box again as he scoffed. "Hell. Maybe one of the animals wasn't even a shifter. Maybe it was just a regular animal caught in the guy's line of sight." He hefted the box into his arms and crossed to the pallet headed for the kitchens. "I'm just saying," he continued gruffly. "I've never heard of anything like what they're describing, and I've been at this for almost five years."

"Five years!" Quinn exclaimed, folding the flaps of his own box back down. "Shit, man. That's a long time."

Nodding, Jeremiah silently agreed. It was a long time. Admittedly, he didn't get a whole lot done that first year except acquire a few nasty scars. That had been what drew the attention of Roger and Bethany.

Imagine Jeremiah's surprise when a stranger slipped into his hospital room

and told him he knew what had *really* caused the lacerations on his back, side, and chest... and it hadn't been a bear attack while hiking.

Jeremiah had learned that Roger and Bethany had lost both their children to a pack of coyote shifters. He'd then shared a similar story about losing his own sister to a cougar shifter. Roger had given him a card with their phone number and address and had told him to look him up once he was well.

That had been almost three years before.

Returning to the truck for the next box, Jeremiah stated, "Someone's gotta make the world a safer place."

"I totally agree," Quinn stated with way too much enthusiasm. "That's why I joined last month."

"Taking a life, even a shifter, should never be taken lightly," Jeremiah warned. "Some don't go feral. It's figuring out which ones keep the others in line that's the real trick."

Quinn grabbed Jeremiah's arm, drawing his attention. His eyes big in his face, betraying his shock, he whispered, "Are you saying you wouldn't kill every shifter on the planet if given the chance?"

Jeremiah clenched his jaw. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Would he? If he could flip a switch and snuff out every shifter in the world... would he do it?

"No," Jeremiah admitted. "I'm a hunter, not a murderer." That was the biggest difference between his own values and the shit Roger spewed. Their leader would very happily throw that switch. "The shifter that gave me this—" as he spoke, he lifted his shirt, revealing the massive scarring on his side and back—"didn't have to let me live, but she did. She was protecting her cubs."

"Fuck!" Quinn gasped, his jaw sagging open as his gaze fixed on Jeremiah's ruined flesh. When Jeremiah lowered his shirt, Quinn yanked his hand away from his arm and ran that hand through his hair. Frowning, he asked, "How can you say you don't want to kill the shifter that did *that* to you?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Jeremiah returned to the task of unloading the truck. "Never go after cubs," he warned. "You kill or steal a cub and leave any shifter in the pack alive, and you'll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life. Besides, you don't mess with kids." As he carried another box from the truck, this one much lighter, he grumbled, "Who the fuck packed this shit? Couldn't they have labeled some of it?"

Quinn groaned behind him. "No kidding."

Setting down his box, Jeremiah saw the way Quinn staggered under the weight of the box. He hustled over to his friend, lending a hand. Sharing the weight, he grunted softly.

"Take it straight to the kitchen pallet," Jeremiah urged. "It's gotta be more canned goods."

After they set it down, Quinn straightened with a groan. He arched his back, stretching.

Jeremiah ignored him, grabbed his cutter, and opened the box. Inside, he found rows of stacked cans. He picked one up and read *beef stew*.

Yum.

Returning it to the box, Jeremiah folded the flaps together, closing the box. He rehung his cutter and turned to see Quinn checking the other box he'd carried. Just as Quinn lifted the box, Jeremiah turned back toward the truck.

Something flashed in the dark beyond the open bay door.

Pausing, Jeremiah squinted into the inky blackness. Had something moved out there? He strode to the edge of the cement bay that the truck was backed up to, peering through the narrow strip between the edge of the bay door and the side of the truck. When he didn't spot anything, he rounded the truck to the man-sized door at the end of the bay and opened it.

"Hey." Quinn called from where he stood beside the short ramp stretching from the back of the truck to the dock. "What's up?"

"I don't know," Jeremiah murmured.

Before the words were completely out of his throat, something big and red with black wings leaped through the crack between truck and wall. It landed in a crouch on the side of the truck, the screech of metal giving away where the beast's claws tore through the metal to hold it in place. The creature's red eyes seemed to glow where they peered out of a skeletal face.

At that exact moment, an alarm klaxon blared. A female with a clearly electronic voice saying, "There has been a breach," cut through the deafening sound. Another blare of the alarm sounded. "This is a Delta level evacuation." A klaxon. "There has been a breach."

Jeremiah found himself frozen in place as the cycle of speaking and alarm continued. His heart pounded in his chest as sweat beaded his brow. Never in his thirty-four years had he seen anything like the creature peering around the loading dock.

Quinn, evidently, didn't have the same problem.

Jeremiah saw Quinn pivot and sprint to the wall where they'd left their weapons. Even in the loading dock, they were supposed to be armed. However, it was tough to lift and move boxes while holding a gun.

As soon as Quinn began running, the red creature moved. It leaped to the floor, changed directions, then lunged after Quinn. The *pop-pop-pop* of the weapon snapped Jeremiah out of the trance-like state that had taken a hold of

him.

Jeremiah sprinted across the loading dock, through a door, and into a garage. His movement took him in the opposite direction of Quinn, but that couldn't be helped. There was no way he could get through the creature to his gun, so he needed to obey the evacuation order.

Delta level indicated fleeing the building... by any means possible. That even meant no one should bother trying to take any shifters in holding with them. Delta was a ditch and run order, every man for himself, then whoever was left was supposed to regroup at a farmhouse thirty miles away.

Jeremiah planned to do just that. As he swung his leg over a dirt bike used to chase down wounded shifters, he knew he had to try, at least, to help his buddy. Bringing the bike to life, he gunned the engine, swung the back tire around to change directions, and headed back toward the door to the loading dock.

Keeping his knees in, Jeremiah shot through the doorway. He put down a foot and spun the bike again, this time toward the still-open man-door next to the truck. At the same time, he swept his gaze over the bay as he yelled, "Quinn? You still in here? We gotta go!"

Just as Jeremiah finished speaking, he spotted his friend. Quinn lay sprawled on the floor near the wall. His gun lay a few feet away, bent beyond any hope of use. Blood covered Quinn's face, his chest, and the wall... a whole lot of blood.

Not only that, but a second creature was in the loading dock. It had a black-clawed hand on the red beast's shoulder where the other creature crouched over Quinn's fallen body. Both turned to peer at him at the sound of his vehicle's engine and his words.

To Jeremiah's shock, the black creature spoke. "I got him."

"Oh, hell no," Jeremiah ground out.

Jeremiah gunned the bike's engine. He shot across the floor, weaving between a couple of pallets. Shooting through the door, he bumped down the stairs. Cursing under his breath, he barely managed to keep from wiping out.

Once Jeremiah found enough balance, he cranked the throttle and shot forward again. None-too-soon, too, for he heard a thud come from almost directly behind him. The sound of claws on dirt and the sweep of wings on air seemed loud, even over the whine of the dirt bike's engine.

Roaring away from the barn converted into a compound, Jeremiah zipped down the driveway. He thought he saw shapes in the trees, but they were there and gone. Then, he was clear of them and he chanced a glance over his shoulder.

Jeremiah had never been the greatest on the bikes. Maneuvering the damn things always seemed to pull at his scars, making it hard to balance. Still, he managed.

Unfortunately, at that same second, the black form of the flying... well, demon, since Jeremiah didn't have another name for the beasts that had attacked them, swooped past him.

"Stop the bike," it roared. It actually kept pace with him, flying through the air. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Yeah, right," Jeremiah muttered, glancing over at it.

Jeremiah swept his gaze over the clear road, then at the flying beast. It was obvious it had plenty of room to follow and seemed to have no trouble keeping up with him, even on the bike. He glanced toward the trees, a plan forming.

Braking, Jeremiah lowered his left foot and swung the bike in a one-eighty. Hitting the throttle, he searched the darkness for what he knew was there. He spotted the single-track path used for training just as he heard the distinctive sound of wing-beats. Aiming for it, he imagined he could feel the creature's hot breath on his neck.

Zipping between the trees, Jeremiah tried to remember the several different turn offs. He knew a couple of the branches on the dirt path led to the main road. If he could get there, maybe he could find traffic. Surely, the beast wouldn't follow him into traffic.

With that plan in mind, Jeremiah took a chance and glanced around again. He spotted his pursuer a ways behind him. It seemed that it had had to slow down, since it couldn't spread its wings as wide.

Jeremiah refocused on the track he followed. Going as fast as he dared, he jumped over ditches, ducked under branches, and tore around trees. Sweat beaded on his face and he clenched his jaw as he concentrated.

"No, stop!"

Hearing the deep-throated cry just as Jeremiah leaped a ditch, he glanced up. He realized his mistake too late. His front wheel landed in mud, sliding out of control. Pitching sideway, Jeremiah tumbled away from the bike.

Slamming into what had to be a tree, Jeremiah saw stars. Pain flared through his left arm and shoulder. His head rang and he suddenly found it hard to breathe.

Gasping, he forced his eyes open. He glanced around, but could hardly make out anything through the gray haze over his vision... or was that just because it was dark and he no longer had the benefit of the dirt bike's headlight?

"Damn it," a deep voice rumbled. "You foolish little human. I didn't want to see you hurt."

Jeremiah scoffed upon hearing the ridiculous notion. Somehow, he just knew the beast that had been chasing him was the one who'd spoken. Blinking slowly, he realized the creature crouched in front of him. Oddly enough, Jeremiah didn't think the beast's expression appeared all that fierce. He actually looked... concerned. Still, when the animal reached out and pulled him away from where he'd fallen, agony spiked through his torso, shoulder, and arm.

He could no longer keep the darkness at bay.

Chapter Two

Grateman watched the human's eyes roll into the back of his head as he passed out. Grimacing, he eased him the rest of the way off the tree, cringing as he heard the sick sound of wood sliding through flesh. Immediately, blood began to ooze from where a broken tree branch had been embedded in the human's left, upper arm.

Groaning at the exquisite scent of the human's blood, Grateman tried to ignore the throbbing of his shaft. As soon as he'd flown into the loading dock, he'd smelled the man. He'd known his mate was in there somewhere.

He'd crossed to where Vane had been kneeling over a downed human, hoping and praying that the bloodied man wasn't the one. It hadn't been. Unfortunately, chasing him down and watching him tumble ass over teakettle into a tree, seeing a branch skewer his arm, he thought this was so much worse.

Grateman knew he had to get the human to one of their doctors. Then, of course, he needed to speak with Chieftain Maelgwn. While he knew his clutch's leader would understand why he'd left the fight, that didn't mean there wouldn't be repercussions.

Like how the hell am I going to win over a hunter for a mate? And if I manage that, how will my clutch-mates accept him? How many of our kind has he killed or captured?

Lifting the human into his arms, Grateman tried to ignore the way the male groaned. He grimaced, knowing his lust was completely inappropriate, but he couldn't help his body's response. This man was his mate... and he'd been looking for him for a long, damn time.

Now, I just gotta save him.

Spreading his wings and bending his knees, Grateman peered skyward. He leaped into the air and flew swiftly back the way he'd come. His people were to take over the place, not destroy it. They needed to scour it for information... provided the hunters didn't destroy it themselves just for spite.

Grateman paused and tipped his body, so he could lift his hand to the ear bud in his ear. He'd been listening to the others as they moved through the facility, giving occasional reports. They'd already cleared out the couple of dozen hunters.

At the moment, Grateman knew the clutch's gargoyle second, Tobias, was in the process of searching for explosives, along with the tracker Treatise. Their techies, the gargoyles Raymond and Vane, were hacking their computers. Vane was checking for explosives via computer records while Raymond checked the status of electronic files.

Maelgwn had led a number of other gargoyles and shifters, plus the doctors, to the holding pens. They'd only found one captive, a brown and white horse shifter. Currently, he'd been moved to the facility's infirmary.

"This is Grateman," he stated into his com. "I need directions to the medical clinic. I need medical attention for one human with a stab to the arm, a hard knock to the head, and unknown internal injuries."

"A human?" Tobias responded. "Did you find him held captive somewhere?"

"No, Sir," Grateman responded. "This human is a hunter."

"Why the hell are you bringing in a hunter?" Vane snarled. "Just leave him to die."

Grateman grimaced. He knew the enforcer's opinion would be shared by many. "Because he is my mate," he responded, just managing to keep the snarl out of his own voice. No sense in pissing off the volatile red gargoyle. The male was already on edge due to being pulled away from his own mate, Matthew, who was due to give birth to their first egg in less than a week.

"Damn it," Maelgwn grumbled. "Bring him in."

Unable to describe the relief that flooded him, Grateman mumbled, "Thanks. Directions to a doc?" After learning where to go, he responded, "Got it."

Readjusting his hold on his mate, Grateman resumed his flight to the facility. He carefully maneuvered through the dock, noting the other human had been removed. The blood sprayed over the wall and the gun, nearly bent in half, remained as a testament to what went down.

Note to self... warn my human to never shoot at Vane.

Grateman landed near a half-full pallet of boxes, then swiftly followed Raymond's directions. Evidently, the gargoyle had pulled up a schematic of the building. Grateman figured he should try to learn more about computers.

One of these centuries.

Grateman served his clutch as a tracker. He could have followed the human in his arms even without his unique scent calling to him. His smell just made it that much easier.

Just shy of jogging, Grateman hustled down first one hallway, then another. He found the stairs and eased down them, trying to be as gentle as possible to the burden in his arms. Grateman mentally cursed whoever designed the damn building.

Why was it so difficult to get to the infirmary? It was as if the place was an afterthought.

When Grateman walked into the room, he realized that notion probably wasn't

too far off the mark. The place wasn't nearly large enough to accommodate the four beds and medical equipment filling the space. Three of the beds were already full.

A growling Sapian lay on one bed, the golden gargoyle's clawed hands wrapped around the sides of the bed. Maelgwn stood at the head of the bed, holding down his shoulders. Doctor Perseus stood over him telling him *just hold still*. Grateman cringed, realizing the gargoyle must have run into someone with armor piercing rounds.

The second bed held a too-skinny male. His dark brown hair was shaggy and his skin appeared sallow. Several IVs were hooked up to him, disappearing in his arm and under the sheet covering his body.

On the final bed lay the blond haired man from the loading dock. While Grateman couldn't imagine living after feeling the rake of Vane's impressive claws, it seemed the human had. For now, at least. Nurse Leroy stood over him, carefully stitching the deep-looking gashes.

Grateman settled his human on the only empty bed. Knowing the docs were busy, he glanced between them. "What do I begin with?" He needed to do something to get started. The amount of blood-loss really concerned him, as did the fact that his human still hadn't woken.

"Remove his shirt," Perseus instructed. "Then clean any wounds you see and tell me what they are."

Using a claw, Grateman carefully cut the long-sleeved shirt from his human's chest. "Holy shit," he whispered, shock flooding him. Unfortunately, it wasn't from the sight of the oozing stab wound on his arm. Thick ropes of scars marred his right hip as well as the right side of his stomach. "Damn, handsome," Grateman mumbled. "What happened to you?" As he spoke, he threaded the claws on his clean hand through his human's auburn locks. Even sweaty, the man's hair felt surprisingly soft.

"Stop dinking about, Grate," Maelgwn ordered. "Go get hot water."

Grateman nodded, pulling his head out of his ass. He crossed to the sink Maelgwn pointed at and filled a bowl with water. Returning to his mate, he saw that his chieftain had already begun wiping the blood from his chest. Grateman hurried to do the same.

After Grateman dipped a cloth in the warm water, he swiped it over the human's broad shoulders and chest. He just about swallowed his tongue when removing the blood revealed something small and black. The human had a small barbell embedded in his nipple.

"Damn." The word escaped Grateman before he could control himself. His cock, which had softened on his trek through the facility, firmed right back up.

"That's so—"

Maelgwn smacked him upside the head. "Concentrate, damn it," he snapped. "Or you'll not have a mate to convince to change his ways and shit."

Grateman grimaced. "Right."

Evidently, it'd been way too damn long since he'd had sex... or the smell of the man's blood was getting to him. As he set about cleaning up the human's chest, then down his arm, he fought the urge to lick the blood clean and use his saliva to help aid the healing.

Clearing his throat, Grateman asked, "How's Sapian?"

"Sapian will be fine," Perseus told him, stepping up next to him and beginning to examine the human. "Especially now that the sedative has taken effect." He began running his hands over the human's torso. "Now, let's see if I can't figure out if he has any serious internal injuries with this shitty equipment."

Grateman glanced around the space again. "They sure didn't care about their hunters, did they?"

"About as much as they cared about the shifters they caught," Perseus grumbled. "That poor guy probably hasn't had food in three days."

"And yet you saved my mate's friend?" Grateman pointed out, jerking his chin toward the other human. "Can't believe Vane agreed to that."

"Actually, Vane brought him in," Perseus revealed.

Gaping, Grateman couldn't believe what he heard. "What? Why?"

Perseus shrugged. "Couldn't say. You'll have to ask him."

Grateman scoffed. "Yeah, that's a conversation I wanna have with him." Vane wasn't known for being the friendliest gargoyle.

"Remove the rest of his clothes while I maneuver the X-ray machine over," Perseus ordered.

Nodding, Grateman began to carefully slice through the man's jeans. When Maelgwn moved to help, he couldn't help but growl at his leader. His chieftain just held up his hands even as he lifted one brow.

"Sorry," Grateman grumbled.

"At least there's no doubt he's your mate," Maelgwn responded, sounding amused. His mirth quickly faded. "There will be a number of rules once we stabilize him and get him back to the estate. You realize that, right?"

Grateman nodded. "I figured as much. What did you have in mind?"

Watching Perseus roll a device over, Grateman didn't notice Maelgwn round the table. He did feel his chieftain's hand on his arm as he urged him to stand back. Doing as he'd silently been instructed, Grateman stepped backward.

"There will be security posted outside his room at the infirmary," Maelgwn told him. "You will be responsible for explaining our ways and discovering why

he chose to become a hunter."

"Think all these scars have anything to do with it?" Perseus asked, cutting into his conversation. "There's more on his back."

Grateman hissed, seeing the impressive lines that could only have come from some animal's claws. The thick scars bisected his back, running from his left shoulder to his right hipbone. They looked like they'd been damn deep.

"How the hell did he survive?" Grateman whispered.

"Good doctors," Perseus guessed. "Doctors that are a far cry better than these guys would have been. These are old. Maybe three or more years."

"I'll get answers," Grateman declared. "I'll find out what his deal is." He knew he had to, or there was no chance for their future.

"Chieftain," Raymond said, his voice over the com interrupting their conversation. "We have everything we can get from these systems."

"Not much there?" Maelgwn asked, frowning. "How can that be?"

"Most of their shit is on paper," Vane said through the communication system. "We're going to have boxes and boxes of records to go through."

"Damn," Maelgwn grumbled. "These guys are even more old-school than we are." He scowled at Grateman. "I sure hope you can bring your mate around fast. I want to know who the leader of this organization is."

Grateman sighed, nodding. "I'll do my best."

"You guys could exchange blood," Perseus offered. "That will start the bonding process and should make him more likely to share information with you."

Growling, Grateman shook his head. As much as he wanted that, because it would cause his mate to accept him more quickly, he refused to manipulate the man that way. "No," he stated firmly, rejecting the idea. "I won't force him that way."

Maelgwn's eyes narrowed, but he jerked a nod. "Just remember, he doesn't go anywhere without an escort, no matter what," he ordered. "We have hatchlings at home, and I will not put them at risk."

Grateman nodded. "Yes, Chieftain."

He sure as hell would never put any of his friend's hatchlings at risk either. After being almost stagnant for a century, his clutch was finally expanding... finding mates and laying eggs. Not only was Vane's mate pregnant, but so was the chieftain's. Death would come swiftly to any person, gargoyle, shifter, or human, that put any little one at risk.

"Then, let's clear out of here," Maelgwn ordered. "I don't want to be here if they come back with reinforcements."

"Are we going to blow the building?" Vane asked.

Grateman couldn't help but think the gargoyle sounded hopeful at the prospect.

"Negative," Maelgwn responded. "I want you to mount surveillance cameras in every sensitive area. I want Raymond to implant a code so we can track if their computers are used, so no trashing anything."

Vane growled through the line, but agreed.

"This man is not safe to move," Perseus stated. "He has a broken rib that is damn close to his lung. I need to operate."

"You've got to be fucking me," Sapian snarled. "What the hell did you give me, Doc?"

For just an instant, Grateman thought the enforcer had been cussing about operating on his mate. He'd seen red, anger stronger than anything he'd ever felt before coursing through him. Sucking in a harsh breath, he let it out as slowly as possible.

"Just relax," Maelgwn rumbled as he watched Perseus cross to Sapian. "We won't leave your mate like this. You know that."

Grateman nodded, peering at his chieftain through his lashes. "Thank you," he murmured, knowing the tightness of his voice betrayed his concern.

Maelgwn nodded once, then crossed to Leroy. "How's it coming with him?" Leroy sighed. "Vane did a number on him, but he'll heal."

"Good," Maelgwn rumbled. "Almost done?"

"Another thirty minutes, maybe," Leroy told him, as he rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "These claw wounds need *a lot* of stitches."

"Keep at it," Maelgwn encouraged. "We need to prove we're better than these damn hunters at everything, including healing the wounded."

"You think that will help?" Leroy asked curiously.

"It certainly can't hurt," their chieftain replied. "Just remember to never be alone in the room with either of these hunters. I don't want to see you hurt."

Leroy snickered. "No worries, Chieftain." He glanced up at the big man, a grin on his face. "I'll always have a syringe of knock-out juice handy."

Maelgwn chuckled. "See that you do."

"I'm gonna clean and stitch up Grateman's human's arm while you finish this up," Perseus stated, having since settled Sapian with a glass of water and a couple of paranormal grade aspirin. "Then I need your help fixing the man's rib."

Leroy nodded. "You got it, Doc."

"In the meantime," Maelgwn stated, "We'll get Sapian and the horse shifter out of here. Maybe free up a little room."

Grateman stood beside his mate, cleaning his legs and helping Perseus with

whatever he could as he inspected his human's bruises... waiting. It was the longest thirty minutes of his life.

Chapter Three

Jeremiah's head felt fuzzy. He struggled to figure out why. Had he had a night out? He had definitely been due one. It'd been ages since he cut loose.

Still, the uncomfortable fog clouding his mind didn't feel like a hangover. It wasn't that kind of pain. Instead, he felt as if he had medicine head... maybe taken too much medicine coupled with a flu.

Images flashed through his mind. A demon. Quinn. Fleeing on a dirt bike. The wreck.

Shit!

Had the black winged beast caught him? How could it not have? He'd totally fucked up, not paying attention to his landing, and had wiped out big time.

Prying open one eyelid took a hell of an effort, let alone the second one. Still, Jeremiah did it. He blinked and blinked again, trying to get his eyes to focus.

"Hey, I'm so glad to see you awake, handsome," a clearly masculine voice stated. Rounding where Jeremiah lay, a slender, dirty-blond-haired guy came into view. He smiled, the move reaching his brown eyes. "You've been out for a couple of days. You had a bit of an accident on a dirt bike and broke your rib. We had to operate."

Touching Jeremiah's forehead, the man continued, "I'm Nurse Leroy Wilde. Everyone just calls me Leroy. Feel free to do the same." He shone a penlight into Jeremiah's eyes, making him blink. "Looks like the concussion has cleared." He removed the light. "What do you remember?"

Licking his lips, then swallowing, Jeremiah tried to get a bit of moisture into his throat. He glanced around the room, again. Now he was able to make out textured, light tan walls with nature pictures hanging on them. He spotted what looked like a sideboard table, but on it rested a lit lamp, a towel, a basin, a pitcher, and a number of plastic wrapped, plastic cups.

"W-Water," Jeremiah managed to murmur.

"Only a few sips," Leroy cautioned, even as he moved to the sideboard. "We don't want to upset your stomach."

Jeremiah watched as the nurse opened a packaged cup, then used the pitcher to fill it about a third of the way. "Where am I?" he asked, meeting Leroy's friendly brown eyes.

Leroy cupped his head, then brought the cup to his lips. "You're safe," he told him. "I'm glad Grateman found you before you woke," he added. "If you'd woken and started moving, you could have punctured a lung." He chuckled

softly. "Of course, the same could be said for him moving you and flying you to us, but you made it none-the-less."

Jeremiah took a sip of the water, trying to make sense of the man's words. *Flying?* Plus, he hadn't really answered his question about where he was. This was obviously not a hospital, but the guy called himself a nurse. A private clinic, maybe? He managed to take a second sip of water before Leroy pulled the cup away.

Licking his lips again, Jeremiah decided his throat felt so much better. "Was chased," he blurted. "By a demon." Oh, shit. Had he blurted that out? Now the nurse was going to send the guys in the white coats.

To Jeremiah's surprise, Leroy chuckled softly and shook his head. "I admit, some of them definitely have that look to them, don't they?" He straightened, crossing his arms over his chest as he grinned down at him. His brown eyes actually twinkled. "They're not demons, though. They're gargoyles... and they're really not that bad." He shrugged, the right side of his mouth curving up. "They just want to be left alone. Find love. Raise kids. Live their life. Same as humans."

Jeremiah blinked. He reached up and grabbed Leroy's wrist. "You think they're the same as humans?" He'd never met a human who felt that way before.

Leroy glanced from his wrist to Jeremiah's face, then stepped backward, severing the connection. "Yeah," he snapped. "I do. And don't grab me," he warned. "My mate doesn't like it."

When Leroy pointed to the right, Jeremiah looked that way. He spotted a tall, toned, black man standing near the door. With his arms crossed and the scowl on his face, he made an imposing figure.

Jeremiah returned his focus to Leroy. "Mate? Are you a shifter?" He blurted out the question, unable to help himself as panic flooded his system. At the same moment, a machine began to beep, attesting to his elevated heart rate.

"Shit," Leroy hissed. "Calm down, buddy," he urged, stepping closer. "I told you that you're safe."

Yeah. Like he believed that!

"Listen to my voice," Leroy urged, resting his hands on his shoulders and pushing him flat to the bed. "I am a human. You have nothing to fear from me. I offer my healing services to all creatures that need me, from human to shifter to gargoyle. I won't let any harm come to you."

Jeremiah scoffed. Struggling, he tried to sit up. "How the hell could you stop them?"

"You'd be surprised," Leroy stated, pushing him down again. "Now, just relax. Along with those rib problems, you don't want to pull the stitches in your arm.

Grateman tells me you slammed into a tree and skewed your arm on a broken branch." He gave him what could only be called a doctor's look of disapproval as he added, "You do know those things are horribly dangerous. Don't you?"

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and his strength gave out. Panting softly, he stared up at the ceiling for a few seconds. When Leroy spoke, he returned his focus to the nurse.

"Will you tell me your name now?" Leroy asked. "And I need to know about allergies."

"Jeremiah," he responded softly, seeing no reason to deny the man. "And I'm allergic to strawberries."

"Very good to know," Leroy responded. "No chocolate-covered strawberries for you. What about medications?"

"No."

"All right," Leroy stated, nodding as he picked up and scribbled something on a chart. "So, you probably have questions. I'll answer them as best as I can." He set the chart back down on the table then returned to him, pulling a chair close in the process. "So, first you should know that while technically you're a prisoner, no harm will come to you." Leroy paused, then waved his hand in the air as he added, "As long as you don't provoke anyone or attack anyone. Self-defense and all that."

Jeremiah sighed. "A prisoner," he whispered. "So you're here to fix me up, then once I'm better, someone takes me to a cell?"

"No cell," Leroy told him. "Our hope is that you'll come around, helping us stop your former companions." He rested one hand on the bed and touched his shoulder with the other. "I know your first impulse is going to be to say *no*, that shifters are monsters that all need to be killed, but we're hoping that—"

"I don't think they should all be killed," Jeremiah whispered. His eyelids slid closed as fatigue swept over him. "But there are so many that go feral." Sighing, he didn't fight his need for sleep. He'd deal with everything when he woke up.

Jeremiah didn't open his eyes the next time he woke. He thought about what Leroy had told him, trying to decide if he believed him. Knowing that he was a prisoner, how could the nurse say no one would hurt him? How could a human stop a paranormal? Was the nurse truly human?

"I know you're awake."

Upon hearing the deep voice, Jeremiah opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, staring at the ceiling. The overhead light was still off, but from the glow to his left, he figured the lamp on the side table was still on.

"How are you feeling?" the male asked, his voice deep and soft. "Do you want

some water? Nurse Leroy says you can have a little, if you'd like."

Licking his lips and swallowing, Jeremiah realized how dry his throat and tongue were. "Yes, please," he whispered, finally looking toward the speaker.

Shock filled him upon seeing the massive black creature from the loading dock. He gaped when it slowly rose from the chair and crossed to the side table. It appeared Leroy had left the plastic cup, for he picked it up. The beast's big, black hand seemed to dwarf the cup as he filled it with water from the pitcher.

When the... *thing* turned to face him, Jeremiah saw that what he thought was a cloak, was actually wings. Peeking between them was the biggest, broadest naked chest he'd ever seen. Forcing his gaze higher, he saw the beast's square jaw and pointed canines peeking over his lip. His brow ridges were pronounced and above that... horns jutted from his hairline, sweeping backward over his skull.

"Holy shit," Jeremiah whispered. "Get away."

Jeremiah had intended to yell the order, but with his dry throat and thick tongue, he barely even managed to get the words out at all. Or was that caused by the panic tightening his chest? Or maybe the spike of fear that caused a surge of adrenaline rushing through his system that was so powerful, he actually managed to get his battered body to slide sideways across the bed.

"Whoa, whoa, there," the creature cried, lifting a clawed hand toward him. "Don't fall off the bed. You might pop your stitches."

"You do talk," Jeremiah whispered. *So I hadn't imagined that.* That still didn't make him relax. "What do you want?"

"My name is Grateman," the creature stated. Holding up the cup, he added, "And I just want to help you with some water."

"Where's Nurse Leroy?"

Grateman took another step closer, which put him at the side of the bed. He held out the cup. "If you're well enough to cringe away from me, I suppose you're well enough to hold this on your own."

Tentatively, Jeremiah reached out to take the cup. Except, moving his right arm put all his weight on his left as well as stretched his torso. Pain erupted through his body like liquid fire in his veins. Groaning, he began to flop backward, but he'd run out of bed and he realized with a cry that he was going over the side.

"Shit," Grateman hissed. Somehow, the beast leaped over the bed. He first grabbed Jeremiah's good arm with one hand, then slid his other arm under his torso. "Easy, Jer," he crooned, helping him back onto the bed. "Can you imagine how pissed the doc would be if something happened to mess up his hard work of fixing your rib?"

"Th-That explains the pain in my chest," Jeremiah whispered. "Why do you care?"

Staring up at the huge male, peering into the male's deep brown eyes, he thought he saw concern, compassion, but how could that be? And why did his prick take that moment to jerk, as if it found something interesting about the male, too? With a catheter in his cock, it was damn uncomfortable. As Grateman released him and pulled his arms away, Jeremiah also found he liked the way they felt, the way his tough leathery-like hide slid across his own skin.

Shit! What is wrong with me?

"One question at a time, handsome," Grateman stated. "Let me get you that water."

"Handsome?" Jeremiah whispered, watching him walk around the bed.

Grateman picked up a new, still-wrapped cup, opening it. "Sorry," he said, smiling. "I dropped the other one when you, uh—" He nodded his head toward the other side of the room's floor. "Nearly fell."

"Yeah, sure," Jeremiah whispered.

"Anyway," Grateman continued. "Leroy is at his regular job. He works in a hospital in town."

"So, he's not a prisoner, too?" Jeremiah questioned. "Even though he's a human?"

Grateman shook his head. "No, not at all," he told him. "He's an extended member of our clutch. He's mated with a boa constrictor shifter and comes and goes as he pleases."

"Boa constrictor shifter?" Jeremiah gaped. "Those things exist?"

Chuckling softly, Grateman crossed back to the bed. "I'm not going to try to hand this to you this time," he told him. "It's obvious you shouldn't sit up and put stress on your chest, yet, so I'm going to cup your skull and help you drink. Are you ready?"

Jeremiah hesitated. Was he ready? Was he ready for this creature to touch him again? "What are you?" he asked instead of answering.

"I am a gargoyle," Grateman stated.

"Right," Jeremiah whispered. "The nurse said that already. I just, uh, forgot."

Grateman nodded. "You've been traumatized, Jeremiah," he stated, waving his hand toward Jeremiah's chest. "And not by us."

Jeremiah glanced down at his own chest, seeing the scars. Right, he had a hell of a lot of ruined flesh. Why had Grateman called him handsome? He sure as hell knew he wasn't. While Jeremiah worked hard to keep his body as fit as possible, his scarring caused limitations.

"Here," Grateman rumbled, drawing his attention. "Drink this, then I'm going

to call for Doctor Perseus. I want him to check you over... make certain you didn't shift anything."

Nodding, Jeremiah watched as Grateman leaned toward him. He kept his mouth shut as the gargoyle slid a clawed hand under his head and tilted his head up. When he brought the cup to his lips, Jeremiah lifted his right hand and cupped his fingers around the creature's thick fingers, wanting at least the appearance of control.

Jeremiah swallowed a mouthful, then another one.

Grateman smiled down at him. "There you go, handsome," he rumbled, looking exceedingly pleased for some reason. "One more sip, then I gotta pull it away."

After Jeremiah swallowed some more, Grateman did just that. He set the cup down on the side table, then he crossed to the door. When he opened it, it brightened up the room with the light flooding through the doorway.

"He awake?" a masculine voice rumbled.

"He is," Grateman responded. "I'm afraid I freaked him out a bit," he admitted, backing up as he spoke. "He just about fell off the bed."

The other male hummed. "Right." Then, he came into view.

Jeremiah once again found himself gaping. The... gargoyle that walked through the door was... green! "You're *green*," Jeremiah whispered. Most of the male was covered in pale green mottled skin, while his wings were black.

The male chuckled. "I am at that," he replied, clearly not at all offended. "I am Doctor Perseus. Most just call me Doc or Perseus. Feel free to do the same." He slowly moved toward him. "Now. Are you going to give me trouble examining you?"

At the blunt question, Jeremiah realized he still had his mouth open. He'd also unconsciously begun gripping the blanket in both fists. Forcing himself to relax his hands, which also fortunately eased the pain in his arm, he shook his head.

"No," Jeremiah whispered. "But how could you be a doctor?"

Perseus nodded. "Good. And I'm a doctor because I studied with a human one over fifty years ago," he explained. "He helped me stay abreast of changing techniques until the invention of the internet. Now, I read a hell of a lot of technical journals."

"Oh."

Huh. Gargoyle doctors. Who'd have thought?

Chapter Four

Grateman watched Perseus check over Jeremiah's wounds.

"I kept you unconscious for a couple of days," Perseus revealed. "I wanted to give your body a chance to begin healing before running the risk of you freaking out." He smirked as he ran his claws over his torso. "I'm glad I did."

"Why are you guys helping me?" Jeremiah whispered. His expression remained wary but he didn't move. "What do you want from me? Information?"

Perseus chuckled. "Of course," he responded, showing no remorse. "Well, our chieftain does." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Grateman. "Should I tell him? Or did you want to?"

Grateman shrugged. "I'll do it."

Nodding, Perseus peered down at Jeremiah. "As for me. I want you to get well and out of my medical bay. Having guards for you and the other human is damn distracting."

"The other human?" Jeremiah whispered. "You took more than one hostage?"

"Your friend from the loading bay," Grateman revealed. "The one who shot at Vane and took a swipe from his claws for his mistake. He's here, too. In better shape than you, actually," he admitted. "He'll never be as pretty as he was before, but he'll live."

"Quinn," Jeremiah murmured, his brows furrowing. "Quinn is alive?"

"He is," Perseus confirmed. "Now. If you're not going to give Grateman a tough time helping you to the bathroom for the next couple of days while you continue to heal, I'll remove this catheter."

"God, yes," Jeremiah responded instantly. Then, he glanced Grateman's way, his face flushing. "I, uh, won't give you trouble."

When Perseus began lifting the blanket, Jeremiah clutched it tighter for an instant before releasing it. He cleared his throat as he glanced between them. "So, uh, would you turn around, please?" Jeremiah asked, his gaze settling on Grateman.

Grateman winked as he grinned at his mate. "I've already seen all of you and touched all of you, Jer," he revealed. "I'm the one who gave you your sponge baths.".

Jeremiah's face turned beet red.

Perseus narrowed his eyes at Grateman. "Turn around, Grateman. Give the man the illusion of privacy, at least."

Lifting his hands in surrender, Grateman turned around. Still, he couldn't help

but say, "Don't worry, Jer. The next time I run my hands over you, we'll both enjoy it so much more."

"Wh-Why would you?" Jeremiah paused as Grateman heard him grunt. "Do that?"

"Done," Perseus stated.

"Thanks," Jeremiah muttered. "Where's the bathroom?"

Perseus chuckled. "Grateman will take you. I'll order you a light meal."

Grateman turned to find Jeremiah still lying flat on his back, the blanket returned to cover his waist. His human's skin still glowed with a blush, though not of the previous intensity. Grateman wanted to see that color on the man for a completely different reason.

Soon.

After that promise to himself, Grateman returned to the bed's side. He slid one arm under Jeremiah, enjoying the feel of his skin. Feeling the ridges that he knew were claw scars, he wondered what it would take to get the man to open up and tell him about them.

At the same time, Grateman reached for the blanket.

"Wait," Jeremiah whispered, gripping it tightly.

Grateman lifted one brow ridge. "I thought you wanted to go to the men's room."

"Yeah, uh, how about some shorts or something?"

Shaking his head, Grateman offered, "After you piss and shower. I bet you're ready for one about now." He easily pulled the blanket from his mate's grip. "By the time we're done, I'm certain the food will have arrived."

Jeremiah frowned at him, but offered no further resistance. Taking advantage of his mate's acquiescence, Grateman rumbled, "Come on, handsome."

"I'm not handsome," Jeremiah muttered. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

Grateman's brow ridges shot up and he looked into the face of the man he held. "Not handsome? Is that what you think?" he asked incredulously.

Seeing the way the man scowled even as he rolled his eyes, Grateman knew Jeremiah believed his words.

Deciding he wanted to change Jeremiah's mind, Grateman thought about what humans found appealing. "Your shoulders are wide. Your chest is broad and well-muscled. Let's not forget your thick head of auburn hair which I find stunning," he admitted. "I want to run my fingers through it and massage your scalp."

"Wh-What?" Jeremiah sputtered.

By then, Grateman had them in the attached bathroom. He lowered his mate to the toilet. Cupping his human's jaw, he tilted his head up as he leaned close. Seeing Jeremiah's wide eyes, the measure of fear in their green depths, Grateman just managed to rein in his desire to kiss his human. "In your time hunting paranormals, have you ever heard the term *mate?*"

Jeremiah's brows drew together. "Leroy used the term mate," he whispered. "He said his mate didn't like it when I grabbed him."

"You grabbed Leroy?" Grateman asked. This was the first he'd heard about it. Surely if the nurse had been injured, he'd have been told when he'd woken from roost, the gargoyle's equivalent to sleep. They just happened to do it as a stone statue during daylight hours.

"I grabbed his wrist when he said gargoyles are like humans. I just... wanted him to clarify," Jeremiah admitted. "I wasn't trying to hurt him or anything."

Grateman heard the truth in his words as well as smelled it in his scent. He nodded. "I'll give you a few minutes," he told him, waving vaguely toward the toilet he was sitting on. "Then I'll help you in the shower."

Jeremiah pinched his lips together, but didn't respond.

Taking that as acceptance, Grateman exited the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He found Perseus standing in the room, leaning one shoulder against the wall. The other gargoyle lifted one brow.

"What?" Grateman growled.

"Don't push too hard," Perseus warned. "He's a hunter. He could feel like you're only coming on to him to get him to trust us... to get him to give up his hunter companions."

Grateman hummed. "Then I will just have to convince him otherwise." He cocked his head. "Double date with me. He could use a solid friend like Wren. Someone new to our world who can share his own misgivings and how he overcame them."

Perseus scowled. "You want me to introduce Wren to a hunter? What if he tries to kidnap him?"

"Your mate is a big-ass human, and not from eating all the food at that restaurant of his... Goldy's Burgers and Bites," he added on a growl. "I think your guy could take him. Besides, Jeremiah is no longer a hunter. He's *my* mate. He's one of us now."

"Don't be ridiculous," Perseus snapped. "Just because he's your mate doesn't make him one of us. You haven't claimed him, yet."

"Only because you kept him sedated for three days and I haven't had the chance," Grateman snarled, pointing his claw-tipped forefinger at the doctor. "So don't give me that shit."

Perseus scoffed. "And if I hadn't given his bones an extra couple of days to heal, the first thing he would have done is re-injure himself trying to get away from you," he snarled indignantly.

"Hey, is everything okay in here?" Sumak asked, walking into the room. The small, pale-purple gargoyle held a tray laden with covered plates and bowls. "What's all the yelling about? And where's your sexy human, Grateman?"

"In the bathroom," Grateman growled. "And no... everything is not okay, but thank you for the meal." He focused his gaze back on Perseus. "I would have thought you of all people would understand needing to change the way you view things."

Perseus crossed his arms over his chest. "*Me* of all people?" he countered. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means, you fought gargoyle doctors throughout the country, trying to convince them that human style training and treatment would be beneficial to our kind," Grateman snarled. "You know it takes time to educate people."

Perseus' jaw clenched for an instant, then jerked a nod. "Sure. Once he's educated, then I'll introduce my mate to him." After that parting shot, he pushed away from the wall and stalked out of the room.

"Uh, wow," Sumak whispered. "Never seen the doc so upset."

Grateman glared at the smaller gargoyle. "Never seen him that upset? He's the one insulting my mate."

Sumak set the tray down on the bed, then placed his hands on his hips. "Look, you've been spending just about every waking moment in here," he pointed out, his tone placating. "You haven't heard the comments, the opinions, the others giving Perseus shit for taking care of the hunters. Maelgwn's orders or not, he's under a lot of stress."

Grimacing, Grateman didn't want to feel bad for Perseus. Unfortunately, he did. In fact, now he even wanted to apologize. Grateman nodded.

"Thanks for telling me," Grateman mumbled, then he scowled. "And all that animosity is going to be directed at Jeremiah the second he gets out of here."

"Not everyone is upset," Sumak offered.

Grateman nodded. "Thanks again, Sumak."

"Can I meet your man, then?"

Rolling his eyes at Sumak's hopeful expression, Grateman shook his head. "You just want to see him naked."

Grinning widely, Sumak didn't even bother trying to deny his claim. "I haven't had sex in a while. I just want a little eye candy."

"Get out of here," Grateman growled, taking a swipe at the smaller male.

Sumak laughed as he danced out of reach, then left the room.

Grateman turned back to the bathroom door and tapped lightly. "Jer, you ready for that shower?"

"Yeah," Jeremiah responded, his voice so quiet it barely came through the door.

When Grateman pushed the door open, he smiled at the sight of Jeremiah seated on the toilet. He had his head tipped back and his eyes were closed. While his knees were splayed, he had his forearm across his lap, hiding his crotch. His chest rose and fell slowly, as if he dozed.

"Hey," Grateman rumbled. "You have enough energy for that shower?" he asked, closing the distance.

"They're right, ya know," Jeremiah stated, not answering his question. "Your people will *not* accept me."

"They will," Grateman countered. He knelt before Jeremiah, resting one hand on his knee. "It will just take time." Rubbing the warm flesh under his palm, he added, "But they're not the only one who needs to come around."

Jeremiah pried open one eye and gave him a tired look. "What does it mean that I'm your mate?" he murmured. Grateman knew he hadn't kept the surprise off his face when Jeremiah admitted, "Ya'll were a bit loud. I heard the whole thing."

Grateman had hoped he'd have more time allowing the man to get to know him before having this conversation, but wasn't about to lie to his human. "You're fading fast, Jer," he murmured. "Let's get you on the seat in the tub and cleaned up."

"Stalling?" Jeremiah murmured even as he struggled to straighten. "Does it mean you own me or something?"

Scoffing, Grateman shook his head. "No," he assured. "Quite the opposite, actually." He rose to his feet and leaned over to start the shower. "Come on."

Grateman turned back to Jeremiah, slipping an arm around him. Helping him to his feet, he supported most of his weight. With his other hand, he gently gripped first one calf, then the other, moving Jeremiah's legs into the tub. During the process, his mate kept one hand in front of his groin.

Once Grateman had Jeremiah settled, he adjusted the shower head to the side, then moved the chair under the spray. "Tip your head back," he urged, picking up the bottle of shampoo. "I'm going to wash your hair."

"I can do it," Jeremiah mumbled.

Grateman chuckled. "You can barely hold your arms up, handsome," he stated, pushing the man's hand aside. "Now, a mate to a paranormal is their special someone, their soul mate. Most paranormals live a long time," he explained, ignoring the stricken look on Jeremiah's face. Instead, he sank his fingers into Jeremiah's thick hair and began massaging in the shampoo. "I'm over six hundred years old, Jeremiah. A gargoyle will often live upward of a

couple thousand years, while shifters and vampires can live around five hundred years. It's a long time to be alone."

"Holy shit," Jeremiah whispered. "Is that why sometimes ya'll go feral?" he asked. "Is it because you are alone?"

"Go feral?" Grateman repeated softly. "What do you mean?"

"Attack humans."

Grateman paused in his ministrations for an instant, then slid his hands down to his neck and eased his head under the water once more. Swallowing hard, he admired the line of the man's throat. His mouth watered, and he wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth into his mate's flesh and mark it.

Pushing away those thoughts, Grateman focused on the question. "It's an interesting possibility, but I don't think that's it," he stated. "That would be like saying a human who remained alone had a higher probability of being a killer. There are plenty of married or attached humans that kill their spouses or their bosses or perfect strangers for messed up reasons."

Jeremiah's brows furrowed. "Yeah. Okay. Then why?"

Grateman threaded his fingers through Jeremiah's hair, making certain all the soap was out. Then, he picked up the soap and started working up a lather. He noted Jeremiah had reopened both eyes.

"I just think there are assholes in the world," Grateman replied honestly. "Just like I think some people become soldiers as a legal excuse to kill, I think some paranormals use the fact that they can hide in the shadows or the trees to do the same." He settled his hands on Jeremiah's shoulders and began to massage gently, working down his good arm. "I'm assuming you've run into a few of them."

For several long moments, Jeremiah remained quiet.

Grateman let him, taking his time to clean his body. He worked around the wound on his other arm, appreciating that the stitches were waterproof. When he moved his hands down his chest and over his scars, he took his time mapping the man's puckered flesh.

Skipping past his groin, since Jeremiah still rested both arms across his crotch, Grateman worked up one leg, then the other. Finally, he nudged his fingers under his arms. He slipped his digits the rest of the way to his upper thigh, then the grooves of his hip.

"Wh-What are you doing?" Jeremiah asked, his voice hitching. "You shouldn't—"

"Hush, Jeremiah," Grateman urged. "You are my mate. The man I want to please. I can smell your arousal. Let me take care of you."

In truth, kneeling at the side of the tub, his head so close to his human's groin,

was like torture. Grateman could smell his growing need. While some embarrassment was mixed in there, mostly there was only the heady scent of arousal.

"Will you let me please you?" Grateman asked roughly, urging Jeremiah's arms away from his groin. Finally, after token resistance, Jeremiah moved his palms to his thighs as Grateman pushed his thighs wider, revealing his long, thick erection. "Such a pretty cock," he whispered, scraping his fore-claw up the thick red vein of Jeremiah's prick.

Jeremiah groaned. "S-So mates are lovers?"

Damn. Hadn't I said that already?

Grateman had said soul mates, but he figured he'd need to be more explicit.

"Yes," Grateman whispered. "Lovers. Partners. Standing together. In pleasure and life."

Jeremiah groaned. "But I'm not gay."

Grateman paused, lifting his gaze to meet Jeremiah's eyes. *Huh*. He hadn't seen that one coming. Still, this was his mate, so gay or not, the human was his.

Chapter Five

Even as Jeremiah said the words, he knew how ridiculous they sounded. He lay sprawled on a chair, in the shower, and had just allowed another male to wash him. Having enjoyed the gargoyle's touch so much, his boner bobbed in the air, calling him a liar.

"Gay or not," Grateman growled. "I gave this to you." He wrapped his large hand lightly around Jeremiah's shaft. "And I plan to be the one to take care of it."

When Grateman had gripped his erection, Jeremiah had just held in his moan. Feeling the man jack him, holy hell he'd never felt anything like it. Maybe it was because his fingers were calloused and rough, or perhaps it was the thrill of knowing his claws were so close to his genitals. It could also have been because he hadn't gotten laid in almost a year. Any way he looked at it, he never wanted it to end.

"Don't stop," Jeremiah pleaded. "Damn that feels good." He even tried to rock into the touch. Even the pain in his chest didn't diminish the ache.

"I won't," Grateman promised. "I am going to lean over the side of this tub and suck you off."

"Oh, fuck," Jeremiah whined.

When the hell was the last time he'd gotten a blowjob? He couldn't remember. "Yes, please."

Jeremiah could barely catch his breath as he watched the gargoyle lower his head to his lap. Even seeing him open his mouth and reveal his impressive teeth didn't cause alarm. Instead, he just managed to keep from begging the gargoyle to hurry the fuck up.

Opening his mouth to do just that, Jeremiah moaned instead. Right then, Grateman stuck out his tongue and lapped across his head. The creature hummed, obviously appreciating his taste, then swallowed him to the root.

Jeremiah thought Grateman's mouth was the hottest, most amazing thing he'd ever felt. The heat, the suction, even the slight scrape of teeth—he moaned loudly. How had the gargoyle known he liked a bit of sting with his pleasure?

Embarrassingly fast, Jeremiah felt his balls roll and tighten. He groaned, digging his fingernails into his thighs against the nearly undeniable urge to grab the gargoyle's horns and fuck his mouth to completion. That didn't stop his body from shuddering, hard, as his orgasm crested, throwing him into the best fucking release of his life.

Grateman didn't pull off as Jeremiah came. Instead, he continued to suck. He even scraped a nail over the sensitive skin of his sack, causing an extra squirt of seed from his dick.

Gasping, Jeremiah struggled to catch his breath. Even though his chest hurt, he felt so damn fantastic. "Shit," he gasped. "I should have had a guy suck me off years ago. That rocked."

Lifting his head, Grateman grinned at him, showing off teeth far sharper than anything in a human's mouth. "So glad you enjoyed yourself," he rumbled. "I'll do that for you any time you like, handsome. You taste damn delicious."

Jeremiah barked a laugh, then hissed in pain. He rested his head against the shower wall and breathed slowly, all the while grinning. "Guess a guy who sucks cock as well as you do is gay, huh?"

Grateman lifted one of the ridges that curved overtop his eye. *Is that his eyebrow, then?* The gargoyle shook his head. "Actually, most gargoyles consider themselves bisexual. We couldn't give a shit if our mate turns out male or female, as long as we find him or her." He ran his palms over Jeremiah's thighs again, dislodging his hands and rubbing the marks he'd made on his skin, clearly appreciating the feel of his skin judging by the way he hummed. "And I've been looking for you for a long time, handsome."

Hearing that, Jeremiah cocked his head. "So, if I hadn't been your mate, you would have killed me in the warehouse? Or let that red gargoyle do it?"

"That red gargoyle is Vane," Grateman told him. "And perhaps... if you had shot at him. He has a bit of a temper, actually." He grimaced. "After some of the things that have happened to him, well, he's a bit... volatile." His brows furrowed. "And while we hadn't intended to kill so many, that's why we'd snuck in at night and on a weeknight, hoping some of you had regular jobs," he explained. Looking a little guilty, he added, "I can't say what would have happened to you."

Jeremiah scoffed. "Well, then," he whispered. "I guess I'm damn glad you think I'm your mate."

Grateman stood and turned off the water. Grabbing a towel from the rack, he shook it out. Finally, he wrapped it around Jeremiah's body as he easily hefted him into his arms.

On instinct, Jeremiah grabbed for the huge male's neck. Gaping, he met the other man's heated gaze. "I do not *think* you are my mate, Jeremiah," Grateman stated, his tone serious. "I *know* you are. Gargoyles recognize their mates by scent."

"O-Okay." What else could he say?

Before Jeremiah knew it, Grateman had carried him out of the bathroom and

back into the bedroom. He carefully set him down, mindful of the tray on the bed, positioning him so his back rested against a couple of pillows propped up against the headboard. That was when Jeremiah saw it.

Grateman wore only a loincloth. Why Jeremiah hadn't noticed that before, he wasn't certain. Still, now that he had, he also spotted the thick shaft clearly outlined beneath the fabric. The gargoyle was hard... and damn big, too!

Jeremiah remembered the fantastic blowjob he'd just received. Would Grateman expect him to return the favor? His ass clenched as another thought occurred to him. Did Grateman think Jeremiah would let him fuck him?

"Relax," Grateman crooned. "Something that caused anxiety just entered that brain of yours." He smiled kindly as he rounded the bed, picking up the tray. "No harm will come to you." He settled the tray on the side table, then removed a cover from a bowl. After he set the lid aside, he picked up the dish and turned back to face Jeremiah. "I would die before allowing anything to happen to you."

Upon hearing the vow, Jeremiah swallowed hard. "Uh, not that I don't appreciate the, uh, sentiment but—" He paused and waved toward the approaching male's massive tool. "When I said I wasn't gay, I meant it. While I don't have a problem with men loving each other, and I get that my body responds to you, I have no experience with—" Cutting off his flow of words, he waved a hand toward the gargoyle's groin once more.

Grateman licked his canine before a feral smile curved his lips. Holding out the bowl, he rumbled, "When the time comes, I will show you the pleasures to be had."

Jeremiah took the offered bowl, setting it on his thigh. "Uh, spoon?"

Chuckling, Grateman turned back to the side table, grabbed one, then returned to him. He handed it over.

"Thanks," Jeremiah murmured. He tried to keep his gaze averted from the male's blatantly outlined cock, but it was tough. Now that he'd noticed it, it was just—"Doesn't that hurt?"

Jeremiah dipped his spoon into the soup, then shoveled a bite into his mouth. At least that way, he wouldn't say any more embarrassing shit. The amazing flavors of the best chicken noodle soup he'd ever tasted burst across his tongue. He quickly swallowed and took another bite.

Grateman chuckled softly as he once again crossed to the table. He removed the lid from two more plates, placed the rest of the silverware on one of them, then carried both to the bed. Easing onto the mattress beside Jeremiah, he placed one plate near his calf, then another on his lap. The one next to his leg was filled with potato salad, potato chips, and *Doritos*. The plate on his thigh nearly overflowed with sandwich wedges, probably egg salad judging from the

yellowish filling.

"Yes," Grateman admitted. "It hurts a little. I won't lie, but I can wait."

"Wait for what?"

Shit! Why do I keep asking personal shit?

"For you to be ready to help me with it," Grateman responded. He didn't seem uncomfortable with Jeremiah's prying at all. "For you to fall back to sleep, then I'll go into the bathroom and take care of it myself."

Jeremiah choked on the bite of soup he'd just taken. Coughing and sputtering, he struggled to clear his throat. Grateman gently rubbed his back, causing warm tingles to spread through his body. After a few seconds, he sucked in a harsh breath, which caused his chest to hurt instead of feel better.

Better than not being able to breathe.

"How can you just admit that kind of shit?" Meeting Grateman's gaze, Jeremiah took the sandwich triangle the gargoyle handed him. "Do you always say what's on your mind?"

Grateman shrugged as he popped a potato chip into his mouth. While chewing and swallowing, he picked up another sandwich triangle. That he finished off in two bites.

After swallowing, Grateman admitted, "I guess I am pretty blunt most of the time. Couple that with you being my mate, all the blood is in my little head, so it's making it a little hard to think." He scoffed, offering him a wry smile that showed off a whole lot of teeth. "I don't mean to embarrass you or anything. We'll just shut up and eat for a few minutes. In the meantime, you can decide how much of your life as a hunter you want to tell me about.

"Here," Grateman added, holding out a pair of small, white tablets. "Pain pills from the doc. A note on the table says to have you take them with your food."

Jeremiah took the pills and downed them with a gulp of warm soup broth, lapsing into silence. He definitely needed a few minutes to think. Eating next to the big gargoyle, sipping soup, eating another sandwich triangle—they were egg salad sandwiches, and they were damn delicious—he realized he wasn't scared at all. His only discomfort was caused by his tight chest and the pain from the stab wound in his left arm.

Once Jeremiah had eaten his fill, he decided to ask a few questions of his own. "Guess I should have asked the doc how long I'll be laid up," he commented. "Do you happen to know?"

"Humans that are bonded with paranormals heal faster than usual," was Grateman's surprising answer. "If we were to bond, you'd be up and around in days, fully healed in a couple of weeks. Healing like a regular human, well, your rib was broken, but it was a clean break, so a month or so."

Jeremiah couldn't hide his surprise. "Huh," he mumbled. "That's quite the incentive, isn't it?"

Grateman shrugged. "Well, while I don't have a problem bonding us just to give you that ability, you should know that we wouldn't be able to be separated for any length of time after that," he warned. "And it wouldn't just be me that would suffer. Before long, you wouldn't even *want* to leave me or our home."

"Bonding takes sex, right?" Jeremiah asked, deciding to be just as blunt. "You'd need to fuck me?"

"I would," Grateman confirmed. "I would fuck you, bite you, and drink your blood." He held Jeremiah's gaze as he added, "And you would do the same to me."

Jeremiah tapped his forefinger against the nearly empty bowl, processing that. Could he have sex with this creature to speed up his healing? He felt his prick begin to stiffen at the prospect, so yeah, he was pretty sure the mechanics wouldn't be the problem. The issue was whether or not it was right.

Could he tie Grateman to him when the gargoyle didn't know a damn thing about him? The creature didn't seem to have a problem with it, judging by his patient expression. What if his clutch decided to kill him for his crimes against paranormals? He'd killed more than a few in his years as a hunter.

"I told Leroy once that I didn't believe all paranormals should be killed, and that's the truth," Jeremiah murmured. "But I have done my fair share of killing." "Is that something you're willing to tell me about?"

Jeremiah nodded slowly, trying to figure out how to explain. The beginning was always best, he supposed. "The first paranormal I killed was a cougar shifter," Jeremiah murmured. "I was out camping with my sister and a few friends. We were attacked while out hiking. My friend went down first, then my sister. My sister's boyfriend, Wes, and I had knives on us and he helped me send the shifter running. My sister was dead before the paramedics arrived." Grimacing, Jeremiah continued, "Wes went back with my sister's body. I stole a gun from a cop's car when he wasn't looking and went after the cougar. It was injured, or there was no way I would have caught up with it," he admitted. "Anyway. I shot it, then drew close to confirm it was dead. Imagine my shock when it shifted into a young man. He didn't say anything. Just glared at me. And then he died, bled out, I imagine."

Jeremiah sighed, rubbing his palms over his thighs. He could feel himself growing tired, his eyelids getting heavy. Leaning his head against the headboard, he allowed his eyes to drift closed.

"After getting over my shock, I started watching news articles," Jeremiah whispered. "Bought a sniper rifle and a handgun. I followed up on animal

attacks. Spent a hell of a lotta time at gun ranges in between tracking down suspicious attacks. I killed seven animals in that first year and a half," he admitted. "I know at least five of them were shifters, not sure about the other two, but if they were going after humans, I won't say I'm sorry for putting them down."

Furrowing his brows, Jeremiah didn't even bother opening his eyes. "Geez, I'm tired. What was in those pain pills you slipped me?"

"The doc gave them to me," Grateman murmured. "You need your rest."

"Yeah," Jeremiah murmured. "Gonna conk out soon."

"Let me help you lie down," Grateman responded, sliding his arms under his body and moving him so he lay flat. "There you go."

Jeremiah hummed, not even opening his eyes when he felt a blanket being slid up his legs. Wanting to get at least a little more out, he added, "I read an article about a coyote that attacked a human. I tracked it down. I didn't realize until too late that the shifter was just protecting her pups. She gave me a lot of these scars, but she let me live."

Scoffing, Jeremiah mumbled, "As I lay there in the hospital, I thought about quitting, but then I met Roger. He has resources. Still, it was a wake-up call. Ya know? She wasn't feral. The teenager that was attacked had been trying to steal one of her pups." He frowned, something niggling at him. "Well, they looked like pups, but when I saw one of them shift, the boy looked about twelve. Can shifters change from birth? Are they born animal or human?"

Sighing, Jeremiah stopped talking. His head felt fuzzy.

"Shifters are born in human form," Grateman murmured, his voice sounding so very far away. "They normally shift for the first time around puberty."

Jeremiah felt the press of lips to his own, the touch too fleeting to think about responding, but he did smile. Even the odd prick of what could only have been Grateman's teeth didn't detract from the kiss. In fact, Jeremiah thought it added to it.

"Go to sleep, my mate."

Even if Jeremiah hadn't wanted to, he could do little else.

Chapter Six

Grateman watched Jeremiah sleep for several minutes. Turning away from the human, he took the mostly empty plates to the table. He piled everything on the tray, then glanced down at his groin.

"Nothing like hearing your mate tell you about his kills to wilt an erection," Grateman muttered. "Probably for the best."

Deciding to track down Maelgwn, Grateman figured it was high time to give a report. He picked up the tray and carried it from the room. Seeing Einan seated on a chair in the waiting room, he crossed to the enforcer.

"I'm going to return these trays to the kitchen and track down Maelgwn," Grateman told the big, gray gargoyle. "Will you keep an eye on my mate's room, too?" He figured the enforcer was there watching Quinn.

Einan jerked a nod. "Will do." He glanced toward the room Grateman had just left, then refocused on him. "How's he doing?"

"He's healing," Grateman replied, pleased the enforcer took the time to ask. "He's sleeping, at the moment."

"He has some impressive scars," Einan commented. It took a hell of a lot to scar a gargoyle's hide, so Grateman imagined not just the enforcer would be curious about the extensive marks covering his torso. "Did he get those fighting and killing paranormals?"

Grateman grimaced, but he refused to lie. Besides, Einan would be able to scent a falsehood. "Yeah," he admitted. "Most of them, anyway, from what I understand."

Einan nodded. "Think he'll come around? We need to know where his friends fled to."

"Maybe," Grateman responded, unwilling to put words in his mate's mouth. "What are we going to do once we find them?"

A cold smirk curved the big gargoyle's lips. "Not for me to decide, but I like Vane's take on it."

Grateman had heard Vane's desires on more than one occasion. *Kill 'em all*. Still, he had to point out—Grateman pointed at the door nearest where Einan sat. "And, yet, he spared that one. Have you heard why, yet?"

Einan shook his head. "Nope. Should be an interesting story, though."

Nodding, Grateman had to agree. Vane wasn't known for being reasonable. He still couldn't figure out how Matthew, the gargoyle's human mate, tolerated his presence for more than small doses. Still, anyone who saw them together knew

that they loved each other.

Hell, they were even having an egg together. Matthew looked about ready to burst. *Vane a father. Crazy*.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," Grateman stated.

Einan just grunted.

Grateman exited the room, quickly heading toward the dining hall. He dropped off the tray at the window leading to the kitchens, thanking Sumak once more. Sumak waved and grinned, then Grateman turned and swept his gaze over the hall's occupants.

Realizing more than one group of people were looking at him, Grateman fought the desire to roll his eyes. His clutch-mates seemed to have little to do these days. He spotted Maelgwn seated at a far table, along with his mate, Bobby. With them was Tobias and his mate Roland.

Quickly crossing the room, Grateman cleared his throat, waiting to be noticed. Maelgwn lifted his gaze from where he'd been leaning and listening to something Bobby had said. Grateman swept his gaze over Bobby's form, noticing his baby bump had begun to show.

Maelgwn pointed at the bench seat across from him. "Have a seat, Grate," he urged. "Have you eaten?"

Grateman nodded. "I have. I ate with my mate. He woke up," he said, moving to the indicated bench. Instead of sitting, he rested a knee on it and leaned toward Maelgwn. "I have learned a few things. Do you have time to sit privately?"

Maelgwn glanced toward Tobias, nodding as he did so. Everyone at the table stood. Maelgwn turned to Bobby. Resting one hand on his protruding stomach, cupping his jaw with the other, he leaned down and kissed him gently.

"I'll be back to our rooms when I can," Maelgwn told him.

Bobby, looking tired but happy, smiled up at him. "Take your time. I'm just gonna go take a bubble bath."

Maelgwn growled softly as he grinned. "Now I'll definitely hurry."

Bobby's snicker was cut off by Maelgwn kissing him.

Grateman looked away and noticed that Tobias was having a similar conversation. Although, from the sounds of it, Roland planned to go change into his lynx form and romp in the gardens. Tobias told him he'd catch up soon, so they could go for a midnight run in the forest.

Following his chieftain and the second, Grateman wondered if he'd ever have conversations like that with Jeremiah. Did the man want kids? Shit, he had forgotten to tell the man about that possibility.

Something else to add to my to do list.

Maelgwn opened the door to his study and led the way inside. Instead of crossing to his desk, he settled onto one of the love seats set up near the fire. Tobias relaxed onto one of the large chairs, so Grateman took the other one.

"How goes it with your mate?" Maelgwn asked without preamble. "He is healing well?"

Grateman nodded. A smile curved his lips even just thinking of his mate. "Yeah," he responded. "He's on the mend. He should be on his feet in a few weeks."

"That's good to hear," Maelgwn stated, sounding like he truly meant it. "And how is his response to you?" He waved a hand toward him, vaguely indicating his wings and horns.

"We hit a bump first thing, but smoothed it over," Grateman admitted. "He's... not what I expected, actually."

"How so?" Tobias pressed.

Grateman rubbed a hand over his face, scowling at the floor. "He's no innocent," he explained. "I won't try to bullshit you and say that he is. He's admitted to killing a number of shifters, but it was why he did it that I found... interesting."

Maelgwn cocked his head. "And what reason is that?"

"What could be interesting enough to counter the fact that he's murdered shifters?" Tobias asked gruffly.

Grateman understood Tobias' skepticism. His own mate, Roland, had been imprisoned and exploited by a man working with hunters... or he'd bought Roland from hunters. Grateman wasn't completely certain. He was a tracker, not part of the inner circle, so he wasn't always privy to every detail.

He didn't mind that, though, because he certainly wouldn't want the responsibility of some of the tough decisions he knew Maelgwn and Tobias must have to make regarding hunters.

"His sister was attacked and killed by a rogue cougar shifter while he and some others were out hiking," Grateman revealed. "After that, he searched for animal attacks. He didn't go hunting like some others. He looked for those who were already feral or dangerous to humans."

"So he ended up in that hunter's facility how, then?" Tobias asked dryly.

Maelgwn also looked interested.

Grateman shifted on his seat uncomfortably. "Uh, I'm not certain," he admitted. "He passed back out before he could finish his story."

Humming, Maelgwn rubbed a clawed hand over his square jaw. He exchanged a narrow-eyed glance with Tobias. Maelgwn was frowning when he returned his focus to Grateman.

"Did Jeremiah say anything about where they picked up Nolan?"

"Who's Nolan?"

"The horse shifter," Tobias told him. "Who are his people? What happened to the rest of his herd? How long has he been held?" His growling questions slowed, but he did finish with, "I know he's your mate, but he needs to do something to redeem himself in the eyes of the clutch. He needs to prove he can be trusted."

"I know," Grateman responded. "I understand." He lifted a clawed hand in placation. "He's been asleep for three days. I just need more time."

Maelgwn smiled at him, his expression softening. "I'm actually impressed. Quinn has not been nearly as forthcoming. He refuses to say much of anything to us."

"Vane did mess up his face," Tobias pointed out, grimacing. "Of course, he also saved him, so—"

"Why *did* he save him?" Grateman couldn't hold back the question.

Clearing his throat, Maelgwn grimaced. "Quinn shot at him, hit him once, too."

"Really?" Grateman hadn't heard that.

Maelgwn nodded. "Just a graze. He swung his arm, reaching for the gun and connected with the human's face and chest," he explained. "Quinn screamed, dropped the gun, which Vane caught. Vane bent it in half and tossed it away. By that time, Quinn had collapsed on the cement. Vane said he was mumbling and babbling about demons and how Paris was right." He shrugged. "Between being called a demon and realizing Quinn may have valuable information, Vane decided to pick him up and leave him for Perseus to find."

"Paris," Grateman repeated. "I'll ask Jeremiah about him."

Now, at least, Grateman understood. Quinn had probably hit a nerve. Vane had been held captive for a number of years, so while he shouldn't have felt sympathy, evidently the big gargoyle had. Plus, Vane figured they could keep him around for information. It wasn't like the enforcer had known that Grateman had found his mate in a hunter at that point.

"Good," Maelgwn commented. "Let me know what you find out."

Grateman nodded. "I will." He rose to his feet, recognizing a dismissal when he heard one. "Congratulations," he added. "I see that Bobby is showing."

"Thank you," Maelgwn responded, a please smile curving his lips. "He's due in four weeks."

"You gonna have kids?" Tobias asked, clapping him on the shoulder, urging him toward the doorway.

Grateman chuckled. "I haven't even claimed my mate, yet." He smirked as he

opened the door, meeting the second's gaze. "What about you? Roland ready to make you a family man?"

Tobias snorted. "My mate is busy enjoying his freedom. We have centuries to plan for that."

"True... shit," Grateman snarled.

"What is it?" Maelgwn asked, coming up behind them. He had a wide grin on his face. "You don't think Jeremiah wants kids?"

"I have no idea," Grateman admitted. "Not only did I forget to tell him that it's even a possibility, I also forgot to tell him he's going to live for over a millennia, too."

"You start bonding already?" Tobias asked, grabbing the door's edge from Grateman's hold. He led the way out of the study.

"No," Grateman admitted, glancing between his leaders. "I offered, just so his healing could be sped up, but he started telling me about all his transgressions and then passed out." Grimacing, he added, "The pills I gave him from the doc probably had something to do with that."

Tobias clapped him on the shoulder, squeezing tightly for a few seconds. "Well, you have plenty of time."

Grateman nodded. "I do indeed." He frowned. "Maybe I should visit Quinn. Has anyone told him that Jeremiah is here, too?"

"Don't think anyone has thought of that, yet," Maelgwn admitted.

"I'll do it. Maybe he'll calm down and help if he knows he's not alone and no one is going to hurt him." He paused, gaining the other gargoyle's attention. "Is anyone going to hurt him?"

Maelgwn opened his mouth to respond, then snapped it shut. He frowned and glanced toward Tobias, who shrugged his shoulders. The chieftain shook his head.

"We don't want to hurt him," Maelgwn stated. "I suppose we could knock him out and transport him across state lines, but we don't know if he's immediately going to start hunting us again."

"Right," Grateman rumbled. "He's not mated to anyone, so he doesn't have a vested interest in our safety."

Tobias nodded. "We'd need to make certain we could trust him," he rumbled, a growl in his voice. "And I can't imagine what he could say that would convince me."

Grateman understood that. Quinn wasn't his mate. He didn't know what he could say to make him trust him, either.

"Right, well, I'll get back to 'em, then," Grateman rumbled. Pausing at a hallway that would lead him back to the infirmary, he turned and smiled at his leaders. "Thank you for understanding."

Maelgwn chuckled. "It took me weeks of watching Bobby before I could step in and woo him. I know how stressful it can be." He offered him an understanding look. "Finding our mate is a gift, no matter who it turns out to be."

Grateman nodded. "Thank you again."

Heading back to the infirmary, Grateman paused in the waiting room. "Hear anything from either of them?"

Einan shook his head. "Nope."

"Mind if I check in on Quinn?"

While the enforcer lifted a brow, he just shrugged.

Opening the door, Grateman peered around the room. It was pretty much a mirror image of the room where Jeremiah lay. The only real difference was the pictures hanging on the wall... and the man in the bed.

Grateman noted the wide, fear-filled brown eyes peering at him. The human lay on the bed, a couple extra pillows behind his back to allow him to sit up. His hands clutched the blanket, his white-knuckled grip also betraying his fear. Bandages covered his left cheek, the bridge of his nose, above his left brow, and down his neck to disappear beneath his t-shirt.

The heavy, acrid scent filling the room gave it away, too.

Trying not to breathe too deeply, Grateman slipped into the room. "Hi," he began, struggling with what to say.

"I won't tell you anything," Quinn whispered hoarsely. "I don't care how you torture me."

Grateman's brow ridges shot up. "I'm not here to ask any questions," he replied. "Well, unless you need something." Seeing Quinn's disbelieving look, he offered a small smile. "My name is Grateman, and I'm here to answer questions, actually."

Easing into the room, Grateman kept his distance from the bed. He leaned against a nearly empty side table. Other than the lamp, only the water pitcher and cups were there.

"When can I leave?"

Grateman sighed. "I don't have an answer to that. You hunt, capture, and kill paranormals," he pointed out. "For now, you should consider yourself our guest indeterminately."

Quinn snorted. "You mean prisoner."

"Gotta admit," Grateman stated, waving his hand. "This is a hell of a lot nicer cell than what you give paranormals."

"That's because you're monsters. You kill humans."

Nodding slowly, Grateman realized that he'd had it easy. This should have been the response Jeremiah had given him. Never had he felt so grateful that it wasn't.

"I admit I've killed a few humans," Grateman admitted. "Mercenaries and hunters have come to my clutch's home with guns, threatening to kill us, and I and my clutch-mates have killed to protect our families." He shrugged. "I would expect you to do the same for your family."

"I tried," Quinn snarled. "But what chance does an unsuspecting human have against vampires? None!" He curled his lip and glared. "That's why hunters are needed. To stop creatures like vampires and you and shifters from killing innocent families!"

Grateman sighed. Yep. This guy was angry.

"You're right," Grateman agreed, probably shocking him, judging by his wide-eyed expression. "But would it surprise you to know that if we find out a paranormal has done that, we stop them? We don't let them continue to do that." He cocked his head and admitted, "Just like your police does everything they can to stop human killers, we paranormals have enforcers that do the exact same thing."

Quinn sneered. "Well, they're not doing a very good job."

"I'd love to know where you think we are failing," Grateman offered. "Tell me how you know we've failed, so we can fix it. We don't want humans hurt any more than you do."

For half a second, Grateman thought Quinn would answer. How hunters found their victims would definitely be useful. Instead, he snapped his jaw shut and glared.

Grateman nodded. "Give it some thought. Please," he added. "I also wasn't certain if anyone had told you that your friend Jeremiah is here, too."

"What?" Quinn straightened where he sat, then grimaced and eased back on the bed's pillows. "Where?"

"In the next room over," Grateman revealed. "He was in a bike accident while fleeing the building, so we brought him here to be healed." Not wanting to get into the other reasons Jeremiah was there, he pointed at the cabinet, then crossed to it. "Do you want to watch TV?" he asked, opening the door and sliding them into the case and out of the way. He picked up a remote. "Sitting doing nothing can get a little boring." He rested the remote on the edge of the bed near Quinn's calf. "Or if you'd prefer a book or a *Kindle* or something just say so. We can set you up with a dummy account."

Quinn's brows furrowed, then he grimaced as if he'd pulled his stitches. "Why are you being so nice?"

Grateman shrugged. "We're not the enemy. I'm just trying to help you see that." He nodded toward Quinn's face. "If you want pain meds or food, something other than what your guard brings you, feel free to ask." He backed away, waving at the space. "This isn't about holding you against your will, it's about finding common ground."

With those parting words, Grateman slipped from the room. He made a mental note to ask Raymond about getting the man an *e-reader*. He felt certain the techie gargoyle would know of one they could give him where they'd be able to monitor activity. That would give the human a little bit of freedom.

Chapter Seven

Jeremiah swam back to wakefulness. Damn. Whatever was in those pills totally kicked his ass. "Ow," he muttered, lifting his right hand to his temple.

"I apologize," a stranger's voice came from his right. "I think someone forgot to tell Grateman that you were only supposed to have one of those pills, but when I started my shift, I noticed they were both gone. Here," he continued. "Drink some water."

Feeling someone slide a hand under his head, Jeremiah muttered, "Thanks." Water would definitely be welcome. When the edge of a cup touched his bottom lip, he clamped onto it gratefully.

"Okay," the man said. "Ease off, now. Don't worry. You'll get more in a sec."

Jeremiah did as he was told. The stranger eased him back to the bed. After a few deep breaths, he struggled to open his eyes. Once he could focus, Jeremiah stiffened.

"Holy shit!"

"Easy, Jeremiah," the man—gargoyle—soothed. "You're okay. My name is Cosmo. I'm a doctor-in-training under Perseus."

Evidently, Jeremiah didn't respond fast enough, although he did nod. He even managed to whisper, "You're blue." The gargoyle was, too. He was pale blue with black wings and claws and white hair.

Crazy!

"Damn," Cosmo murmured. "I didn't mean to freak you out. Maybe you'll relax if I take my human form."

As Cosmo spoke, he... *changed*. His hide smoothed to reveal lightly tanned human skin. The man's claws disappeared. His wings seemed to retract into his back. In just a few seconds, a lean, toned, white-haired guy wearing a loincloth stood where the gargoyle once had.

"Holy, fucking, mother-of-God!" Jeremiah screamed, doing his best to scramble backward. Within seconds, the bed fell away and for the second time in as many days, Jeremiah realized he was about to fall.

Once again, someone caught him.

"Stop moving, Jeremiah," a deep voice ordered. "No one will hurt you. You are safe."

Jeremiah froze in response to the male's words. With the light scrape of claws on his arms and the roughness of the guy's hands, he could guess at what held him. *A gargoyle*. Slowly, struggling to obey, he turned his head to look.

Gaping once more, Jeremiah peered up at a midnight blue creature with black wings. He met the male's piercing gray eyes as he struggled to keep moving oxygen in and out of his lungs. The male offered him a kind smile.

Huh. That's nice.

Then, the blue gargoyle helped him slide back onto the bed. Feeling the warm sheets on his skin, Jeremiah remembered his nakedness. He grabbed for the blanket and pulled it up over his waist. So much for a pair of shorts after his shower. He had no idea how he'd forgotten.

"My name is Maelgwn," the dark blue gargoyle stated. "I am the chieftain of this clutch. I suppose Grateman didn't discuss roosting, bonding, or molting with you."

Swallowing hard, Jeremiah glanced over at the once again pale blue gargoyle. The male actually wore kind of a sheepish expression on his face. Leaning in the doorway was a deep green gargoyle that seemed almost as large as the dark blue one.

"Uh, n-no," Jeremiah murmured. Then he frowned. "Wait. Bonding, yes," he admitted, feeling his face heat. *Damn fair skin*. Sometimes he hated having auburn hair, no matter how much the ladies always complimented him on it. Clearing his throat, Jeremiah continued, "The others, uh, r-roosting or—"

"Molting," the green gargoyle in the doorway supplied.

Jeremiah nodded. "Right. Molting. No idea. What is it?" He knew he babbled, but these were supposed to be gargoyles not shifters. He pointed at Cosmo. "And th-th-that. Uh, is it, uh, he, is he a sh-shifter?"

Why Jeremiah found himself comfortable with the big creatures that looked like demons and called themselves gargoyles, but not with men that shared bodies with animals... he couldn't explain. Maybe he'd just had one too many shocks.

Clearing his throat, Maelgwn redrew Jeremiah's attention. "Okay, let's start with roosting, then," he stated. "Just like in myths, gargoyles sleep during the day as a living stone statue," he explained. "Then, we wake at night, able to move, think, reason... exist just as you do."

"Stone?" Jeremiah couldn't help gasping the word. "You turn into stone?"

"Consider it our version of *sleep*," Maelgwn explained. "We just happen to develop stone armor during that time."

"And we can't wake up during the day until after molting," the green gargoyle told him. "Which we do after bonding." He smirked. "Bonding you know about."

Jeremiah felt his face flame with heat. Clearing his throat, he glanced around at the men. "So, what is molting then?"

Maelgwn chuckled as he leaned back against the wall. Crossing his arms over his chest, he replied, "When we find our mate, we bond with him or her." He smirked and winked. "The morning after we complete our bond, gargoyles go through molt. It's a fairly painful process where our body transforms into a human form for the first time."

"You gain a human form?" Jeremiah whispered. "But why?"

Cosmo actually snickered. "Can you imagine going into town for groceries looking like this?" he asked, holding his arms away from his sides. "Besides, if we're sleeping through the daylight hours, how are we supposed to protect and care for our mate?"

"You have a mate?" Jeremiah whispered inanely.

Nodding, Cosmo grinned. "Yep. Kamille is a stunning, black-haired beauty. We've been mated almost three hundred years now. Had three eggs together." He dug into a pouch on a belt around his waist. "Want to see pictures?"

"O-Okay," Jeremiah whispered. "Sure."

Eggs? Three hundred years? Holy shit!

"Before you start showing off baby pictures," Maelgwn stated, halting Cosmo's movements. "Will you give him a quick check-up, Cos? I think we overloaded his brain and he needs a minute to think."

Jeremiah would never admit how grateful he felt at the gargoyle's suggestion.

Ten minutes later, Cosmo gave Jeremiah an encouraging smile and left the room. The green gargoyle, whose name he'd learned was Tobias, closed the door and leaned against the wall. Maelgwn eased onto the chair beside his bed.

"Okay, Hunter," Maelgwn rumbled. "We know that in the past you went after shifters who you thought had already targeted humans." He cocked his head and folded his hands over his abdominals. "Do you mind telling us why that changed?"

Jeremiah sighed. It seemed now was the time for the interrogation. Thinking quickly, he wondered where Grateman was. He missed the gargoyle.

"I'll answer your questions if you'll answer mine," Jeremiah offered.

Maelgwn's brow ridges shot up. Just as quickly, a smirk curved his lips. "Very well. I'll even let you ask me a question first, Jeremiah. What do you wish to know?"

"Where's Grateman?" Maybe that wasn't the best thing to ask with his free pass, but it came out anyway.

Maelgwn's smile actually looked pleased. "The time is not quite half past two o'clock PM," he replied. "Grateman is sleeping, roosting, on the parapets."

"Parapets?" Jeremiah whispered. "Am I in a castle?" He shook his head and

held up his hand. "Wait. That's not what I want answered."

Holding out a hand, palm up as if to say proceed, Maelgwn waited.

Damn. What do *I* want to know?

"Do you really hatch from eggs?"

Maelgwn's eyes narrowed. "We do," he confirmed.

"Your eggs hatch into gargoyles? How does that work?"

This time, Maelgwn exchanged a look with Tobias. After a long moment, he returned his focus to Jeremiah. The gargoyle's serious expression caused trepidation to trickle down Jeremiah's spine.

"All gargoyles are male," Maelgwn revealed. "Whether we mate with a woman or a man, we have the ability to impregnate them with our egg. That egg will always hatch a male gargoyle." He cocked his head as he added, "A gargoyle with a female mate has a fifty-fifty shot at having a female child. When that happens, they're born as a human and live their life with enhanced senses. If the child is male, he will start as an egg and hatch as a male gargoyle, subject to the laws of our kind." He smirked. "Male mates always lay eggs. Always."

A conversation Jeremiah had overheard flashed through his mind. Paris had been speaking with Roger. The stranger had claimed to know where to find demon eggs. Roger hadn't believed him, but what if the man actually *did* know? Eggs were evidently the gargoyle's young. How horrible would that be?

Then, something else suddenly became more important. "Wait a minute," Jeremiah cried. "Ya'll can get men *pregnant?*"

"We can." It was Tobias who answered. "But don't worry too much, Jeremiah," he urged. "Birth control is easy enough for our kind. As long as you eat a bit of cinnamon each day, it renders our sperm... sterile, for lack of a better word."

Jeremiah barked a laugh, unable to stop himself. Of course, that instantly hurt, too. Still, he'd survive. "Men having kids," he whispered. "Holy shit!"

Maelgwn chuckled softly. "Now, then," he rumbled. "If you could answer *my* original question, and a few others, please."

Nodding, Jeremiah realized that was only fair. The interrogation had been pretty one-sided so far. The gargoyles had been more than patient.

"I almost quit after I got these," Jeremiah told them, running a hand over the massive scarring on his stomach, side, and back. "I realized sometimes I had misinformation, like why an attack occurred."

Jeremiah grimaced, then admitted, "Plus, I didn't have the resources, but while in the hospital healing, I was approached by Roger. He and his wife, Bethany, lost both their kids to a pack of coyote shifters... and they're rich, so..." He paused and shrugged. "Anyway, I thought with their resources, I could really

do some good in the world." Sighing, he shook his head. "It took me almost a year, because it's not like they trust new recruits right away," he added dryly. "But I'm sorry to say that they were not very selective in who they went after."

Guilt flooded Jeremiah, remembering the shifters he'd occasionally seen brought in... or had helped catch. They hadn't deserved what had happened to them. He'd tried to rationalize his actions by remembering the evil shifters he'd tracked down. It had worked for a while, but now he realized how much of a mistake he'd made.

Seeing the scowl on Tobias' face and the way Maelgwn clenched his jaw, Jeremiah knew he was in hot water.

Maybe, though, I can make amends?

"I'll tell you everything about their organization," Jeremiah whispered. "Just... just know that most of the men who joined thought they were helping save lives. They've been, well, brain-washed—" Was there any other word for it? "To believe that all paranormals are evil. It's on you to prove otherwise."

"On *us*," Maelgwn corrected, leaning close, a serious expression on his features. "If *you* expect *me* to start taking prisoners left and right and trying to correct their views, then *you* are going to be helping, Jeremiah."

Jeremiah's eyes widened. They wanted his help? "How can you trust me to do that?"

Tobias shrugged. "Let's begin small. Tell us everything you know about a guy named Paris."

Letting out a slow breath, Jeremiah nodded. "He and a couple of other guys arrived at the facility just last week. They said they were demon hunters. I overheard a meeting they had with Roger about—" He paused, glancing between the gargoyles uneasily. "Well, about finding demon eggs and using them as leverage," he whispered. Upon hearing both Maelgwn and Tobias growl, Jeremiah cringed. "I know where they're regrouping. Maybe you can catch them?"

No one should steal another's kids, human or gargoyle.

"Tell us everything," Maelgwn ordered.

Jeremiah nodded. After accepting a cup of water from Tobias, he started talking.

Jerking awake at the sound of the scream, Jeremiah hissed as pain exploded through his chest. He breathed deeply and realized his head still felt really fuzzy. From that, he guessed he'd only taken the meds a couple of hours ago and he must not have been sleeping all that long.

As Jeremiah lay there, the sound of voices filtered through his door. Evidently,

there were a number of men in the waiting room. Some voices were louder than others.

"Ah, fuck!" a man cried. "I have so much more respect for women now. Shit!" Jeremiah frowned, especially when he heard Cosmo say, "I've called for Doctor Perseus, Matthew. Just breathe deep for me."

"I am breathing!" the first man snarled. That must have been Matthew. "You better be happy with one, Vane. Cause there's no way I'm doing this again!"

A deep voice rumbled a response, but it was too low for Jeremiah to make out... or too far away. In seconds, the only thing he heard was the hush of men speaking far away. He wondered what was going on, but didn't have the energy to get up, go to the door, and ask. Jeremiah wasn't even certain anyone would tell him. Sighing, he closed his eyes and willed sleep to take him.

Jeremiah had just begun to doze when a hand on his shoulder roused him. He hissed when it pressed too close to the stab wound on his arm. Immediately, the hand moved to his chest. That wasn't much better.

Snapping his eyes open, Jeremiah turned and saw Quinn standing beside his bed. He gaped for an instant, first at the bandages covering his face and neck, then because he was surprised to see the man. Getting hold of himself, he grabbed Quinn's wrist and slid it up and off of his healing torso.

"Hey," Jeremiah greeted roughly. "What are you doing here?"

Quinn grinned. "I'm getting us the hell out of here." His smile faded just as quickly. "Did you know that these monsters can implant eggs into a human host? How freaky is that? One is *giving birth* right now." He curved his fingers in air quotes even as he shuddered. "Disgusting!"

Pulling away from Jeremiah's weak grip, Quinn grabbed the blanket and yanked it down. He grimaced, then rounded to a small dresser on the other side of the room. "Shit, Jer. They haven't even dressed you. Are you that injured?" He came back with a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. "Let me help you."

Jeremiah wanted the clothes, but he didn't know if he wanted to leave. It was an odd realization. Still, he didn't want his buddy to get into trouble for his escape attempt. Maybe he could talk him out of it.

Except, after dressing, even with Quinn's help, Jeremiah felt sweat bead his brow and his head swam. He had trouble stringing two words together, especially when Quinn wrapped an arm around his torso and helped him to his feet. He had to squeeze his ribs, which nearly caused Jeremiah to black out. Fortunately, Quinn moved his hand to Jeremiah's waist.

Jeremiah found himself out of the hospital wing and struggling down a hallway before he knew it.

Chapter Eight

Grateman paced Maelgwn's study. "What do you mean, he's *gone?*" he snarled roughly. "How could Jeremiah be *gone?* He could barely walk on his own."

"During the commotion of Matthew laying his egg, Quinn took him," Raymond explained. He swung Maelgwn's laptop around and showed him the screen. It was broken into four video snapshots. "Here they are leaving the infirmary. Here's one of them slipping out a side door. And these two show their trek through the woods."

Growling softly, Grateman stared at the pictures. In each of them, Jeremiah leaned heavily on the other human. He didn't seem to be more than half conscious.

"He was doing fine yesterday," Grateman murmured, touching the screen. "What happened to him?" He scowled. "Did Quinn hit him on the head or something?"

"No," Maelgwn countered. "He was exhausted after telling Tobias and I everything he knew about the hunters. Cosmo gave him a sleeping pill, so he'd get plenty of rest. That way, he'd have more energy once you woke from roost." Sighing, Maelgwn growled, "He's drugged, not injured any further."

"Who's going after them?" Grateman snarled. He wished he could be one of them, but without a human form, he couldn't very well go into town to search for him. Not when others could be sent.

"Detective DeSoto and Tristan are on it," Maelgwn assured. "Along with Einan and Tobias," he assured. He turned to Raymond. "Have you been able to hack traffic cams in town at all?"

"There aren't that many to hack," Raymond admitted. "I have Quinn crossing main street almost two hours ago, but after that I lost him." He gave Grateman a sympathetic look. "He was alone, so it seems he left Jeremiah somewhere."

"I need to get out there," Grateman growled. "I need to do *something*. If he left him in the woods, I can find him."

Maelgwn hesitated only an instant before jerking a nod. "I'll go with you," he stated. Focusing on Sapian, he ordered, "Coordinate with the others and keep me posted."

Sapian nodded from where he stood. Mostly healed, only the slightest pucker of flesh remained where he'd had three slugs dug out of his torso. "It will be done."

Grateman didn't wait for more. He spun and stalked out of the room. Trotting

to the nearest exit, he spread his wings and took flight, heading to where the pictures had shown Jeremiah had disappeared into the trees.

* * * *

Jeremiah shifted uncomfortably, trying to get away from the lump that was digging into his spine. Frowning, he peeled open first one eyelid, then the second one. He peered around the room. For the second time in as many weeks, he didn't recognize where he was.

Easing slowly to a sitting position, Jeremiah ignored the pain. Once seated, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The spinning of his head made standing impossible, so he sat and stared at the floor.

When Jeremiah could focus again, he took in the room. He realized he was in a run-down hotel room. There were two queen beds, plus the traditional small round table and two chairs, and a bureau with a TV on it. To the right was a half-open door showing a bathroom. A microwave and coffee pot rested on a counter set in the back wall with a tiny refrigerator underneath it.

"Where the hell am I?" Jeremiah wondered. "And how did I get here?"

Jeremiah racked his mind, searching his memories. He had a long conversation with Maelgwn and Tobias, but after that... nothing. Wait... wait, there was something. Something about Quinn.

Rubbing his temple, Jeremiah glanced around again. Either way, he needed to get in touch with Maelgwn or Grateman. He had no desire to have them think he was going back on his word. What if hunters had infiltrated the estate? He needed to figure out where he was.

Pushing to his feet, Jeremiah lurched to the nightstand. The only thing inside was a Gideon Bible. He used the bed as a crutch to help him make it to the desk. On it, he found stationary that told him he was in a motel in Durango, Colorado. *Okay*.

There were a few fliers, too, which he flipped though. He paused at one, the name of the place catching his attention. While sitting naked on the toilet, he'd overheard Grateman arguing with Doctor Perseus. The doctor had a mate, which he didn't want Jeremiah around. A mate named Wren, who happened to work as a cook at the diner *Goldy's Burgers & Bites*.

Picking up the phone, Jeremiah dialed zero to get an outside line, then the number for the restaurant. A moment later, a young male greeted, "Thanks for calling Goldy's Burgers and Bites. This is Tim. How can I help you?"

Shit. Now what?

"Uh, is Wren there?" Yeah. Just brilliant.

"He is," Tim responded. "Who should I tell him is calling?"

Wren wouldn't know him, so what should he say to convince him to take his call? "This is Jeremiah. Will you tell him it's an emergency and that I'm a friend of Perseus and Grateman?"

"Will do," Tim responded. "Hang on, please."

Jeremiah didn't bother responding, but he didn't have to. Almost immediately, hold music sounded through the phone. Rubbing his forehead, Jeremiah waited.

"Who is this?"

Jeremiah's eyes widened upon hearing the deep, gruff voice. He swallowed hard, then asked, "Is this Wren?"

After an instant of hesitation, the man replied. "Yes. How do you know Perseus?"

Needing to know if this was the right Wren, he stated, "My name is Jeremiah. Are you, uh, are you... Perseus' mate?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Wren snarled. "You think you're going to threaten my mate?"

Relief filled Jeremiah. "Oh, thank God," he whispered. "No, I don't mean to threaten you or anyone." *Now*, *anyway*. "I'm trying to contact Grateman. He's my mate, but I'm in a motel, and I'm not totally sure how I got here."

Wren remained quiet for a few seconds, then warily asked, "What motel are you at and what room are you in?"

Good question.

"I, uh. Hold on," Jeremiah murmured. "I'll check."

Setting down the phone, Jeremiah forced himself to his feet. He rested one hand on the wall, using it for support as he made his way to the door. After opening it and noting the sixteen on the door, he closed it and returned to the desk.

Jeremiah told the man the information, then asked, "Do you have a phone number for Grateman?"

"No," Wren replied. "But I can give you Maelgwn's. You want it?"

"Yeah, absolutely," Jeremiah replied. He grabbed a complimentary pen and paper. "Ready."

Wren rattled off a number and Jeremiah's unsteady hand could barely keep up. "I'm going to send over a couple of guys to keep you company," Wren stated. "You don't sound too good."

"Okay," Jeremiah whispered. "The door's open."

"You shouldn't leave your door open," Wren cautioned.

"Yeah, well, if your guys want to get in the room, that's the only way," Jeremiah replied. "After I call Maelgwn, I'm going to pass out. I'm still

recovering."

"Recovering?" Wren asked. "From what?"

"I—" He paused, hearing the knob turn. "Someone's coming in," he whispered. "I gotta go."

"Jeremiah?" Wren called. "What's going on?"

Jeremiah didn't answer. Instead, he returned the phone to the cradle. As quickly as possible, he picked it back up again, hit zero, then dialed Maelgwn's number. He prayed the man would pick up and listen.

"Hey, Jer," Quinn called, entering the room. "You're up. That's fantastic." He grinned as he swept his gaze over Jeremiah's seated form. "I was worried I'd have to carry your ass to the car, too."

Setting the phone down on the desk, Jeremiah murmured, "Quinn. How did I get here?" He paused, then added, "Did you carry me all the way to the Timber Ridge Motel?"

Quinn closed the door behind him. "Yeah, man. I couldn't leave you behind, especially when I realized they were keeping you sedated." He crossed to him and cocked his head, eyeing him critically. "You're looking a little rough. What'd they do to you?"

Jeremiah eased back in his chair, sighing. "They didn't do anything, Quinn," he told him. "I wiped out on a dirt bike while trying to get away." He didn't add that he was being chased at the time. That wouldn't help Quinn believe paranormals weren't a threat... well, not one human hunters should go after, anyway. "One of the gargoyles took me to their infirmary. They stitched me up. They even operated and fixed a rib so I didn't puncture a lung."

Quinn's brows furrowed. "You make it sound like gargoyles are a good thing."

"You remember what I told you while unloading those boxes at the dock? That I didn't think all paranormals deserved to die?" Jeremiah asked.

Scoffing, Quinn rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I remember. Do you still believe that?" Frowning, Jeremiah asked, "Do you believe Hitler was right to try and wipe out an entire ethnicity during the Holocaust?"

Quinn gaped. "Shit, no man. How could you even ask that?"

Jeremiah carefully shrugged. "I'm just wondering how you think us destroying every shifter or vampire is different than Hitler trying to do the same thing to Jews."

"It's totally different," Quinn growled. "I—" He stopped and huffed a breath. "You know what? Whatever. I rented a car and contacted Roger, so he knows where we are and where those monster's home is. We won't have to worry about them for much longer." He began reaching for him as he said, "Come on. I'll help you to the car."

"I gotta piss first," Jeremiah claimed, trying to stall. He wondered how long it would take for Wren's friends to show up. Could Maelgwn trace the call and figure out where he was? Jeremiah had no idea of their capabilities. "Help me to the bathroom."

"Right. Sure," Quinn grumbled.

Jeremiah took his sweet time getting to the bathroom, then made slow work of taking care of business. He had just finished washing his hands and face, drying them on a towel, when he heard the knock.

Quinn warily called out, "Who is it?"

"Delivery," a slightly accented masculine voice stated. "Goldy's Burgers and Bites."

Jeremiah quickly yanked open the bathroom door. "I ordered it," he claimed, leaning against the frame. He was getting damn tired of the fatigue and pain. "I was hungry when I woke and didn't know how long you'd be."

Grunting, Quinn nodded. "We can eat in the car." He opened the door.

"Hello, handsome," that same masculine voice stated. "Can I come in and set this down?"

Quinn scoffed. "Whatever, dude. It's not gonna get you a better tip," he stated, stepping backward and letting a tall, muscular man with skin nearly black as night into the room. "What do I owe you?"

The guy sauntered into the room, glancing from Quinn to Jeremiah. "One of you guys, Jeremiah?"

"I am," Jeremiah revealed.

The stranger set down the bag on the table, then grinned at Quinn. "Excellent. That means you're available." He stalked toward Quinn. "My name is Taolma. You gonna tell me your name, sexy?"

Quinn must have finally realized that Taolma was serious about his attraction. He gaped, then glanced toward Jeremiah, allowing him to see the way his friend's face flamed. Jeremiah hid a snort behind his hand.

Pointing at the food, Jeremiah offered, "Quinn, I can go sit and eat outside if ya'll want to have a little fun."

"What?" Quinn gasped. "B-But I was married... to a woman."

Jeremiah grinned. "Well, you're single right now, so why not have a little fun?" He looked at Taolma, impressed by his lean, strong form. "He's a good looking guy. From his straight-forwardness, I'm guessing he's not a virgin." He waggled his brows. "You gonna make it good for my buddy?"

Taolma actually growled softly, his expression clouded with lust. "Oh, I will make it very, very good for you." He reached out, grabbing Quinn's wallet—where the man had gotten it, Jeremiah had no idea. "Set this aside, Quinn."

Even the way Taolma said his friend's name sounded, well, feral. Huh. Was this guy a shifter? Jeremiah couldn't say he'd be surprised if he was.

"What's the hold up?" A man asked, appearing in the doorway. This man was also tall and black, but older. His brows shot up as he took in the scene. "Taolma?"

Hardly glancing over his shoulder, Taolma growled, "This trip might take longer than planned, Golren. This handsome Quinn is mine."

Yep. Definitely a shifter.

Evidently, Quinn hadn't noticed, yet, which was good.

Jeremiah cleared his throat, drawing Golren's attention. "I'm Jeremiah. Ya wanna help me out the door... and that food smells amazing." He pointed at the bag. "Is there a picnic bench around or something where I can eat? We can give these guys a little, uh, privacy?"

Golren gaped for an instant, then glanced at the others. Evidently, he understood what was going on, too. He jerked a nod, then crossed to the bag, grabbed it, then came to Jeremiah. "You okay to move?" Golren asked softly. "Grateman is damn worried about you."

Sighing, Jeremiah smiled. "You talked to him?"

Golren nodded. "Yeah. We got a few texts from our friends on the way over," he whispered, glancing toward the other pair before wrapping his arm around him and urging him to lean on him. "Let's get you out of here and back to him."

"God, yes," Jeremiah mumbled. "That bed is so damn lumpy."

Chuckling, Golren easily helped him out of the room.

Jeremiah wasn't certain why he was trusting this stranger, who was most definitely a shifter. He could tell by the ease with which he maneuvered him. Never in a million years would he have thought he'd willingly go with a shifter, so he could get away from a fellow hunter.

Evidently, Jeremiah exiting was finally the action that woke Quinn from his confusion. "Hey, wait a minute," he cried, whipping a gun from behind his back. "Where are you taking him?"

Jeremiah had no idea where Quinn had gotten the gun any more than he knew where his ability to rent a car and pay for food had come from. He paused, still leaning on Golren as he frowned at his friend. "What are you doing, Quinn? He's just giving me a hand so you can have some privacy."

"I don't need privacy," Quinn snapped. "We're leaving town, remember?" He glared at Taolma. "I sure as hell ain't gonna let you fuck me. Back off!"

Taolma lifted his hands as if in placation. Then, in a move Jeremiah couldn't see because the black man's body was in the way, he moved his hands. In the next instant the gun was on the motel room floor. He spun Quinn around to face

the desk and bent him over it. The man's lean form draped over him, his wrists were pinned to the desk on either side of his head.

"Stop moving," Taolma ordered, his tone gruff. "You are safe. I will not hurt you." He rubbed his nose up Quinn's neck, inhaling deeply. He sighed, obviously enjoying the man's scent. "You smell so fucking good. I had no idea a mate would smell this good."

Quinn froze. He peered over his shoulder, his wide-eyed gaze straying from Taolma to Jeremiah and back to Taolma. "You're a shifter?"

"I am," Taolma rumbled. He rubbed his hands over Quinn's upper arms, obviously trying to soothe. At the same time, he pressed a kiss to Quinn's bandaged cheek. "Try to relax," he urged. "You're safe."

Instead, fear filled Quinn's eyes as he returned his focus to Jeremiah. "You called them?"

Jeremiah nodded. "I did."

"Why? How could you?" Quinn squeaked, his fear obvious.

"Because I want to save a lot of innocent lives," Jeremiah murmured. Grimacing, he added, "And some not-so-innocent ones." He tipped his head to look up at Golren. "We must warn the gargoyles. An attack is coming."

Chapter Nine

Grateman stood on the front porch, watching the SUV roll down the driveway. Jogging down the steps, he reached the vehicle just as the driver, who he noted was Golren, stopped before the garage. He yanked open the front passenger door.

A wellspring of relief flooded Grateman upon seeing Jeremiah's pale face and wan smile. "Jeremiah," he rumbled, reaching for him. He gently took his mate's face in his hands, cupping his neck and jaw. "Are you okay? Do you hurt? Are you hungry?"

"Hey, Grateman," Jeremiah murmured. "The guys brought me a burger and holy shit was it amazing. Have you ever eaten Wren's food? Amazing."

"No," Grateman admitted. "I haven't."

Jeremiah hummed. "After we bond and you go through molt, you're totally taking me."

Grateman grinned at his mate's words. "You have yourself a deal."

Closing the distance between them, Grateman pressed his lips to Jeremiah's. He enjoyed the soft feel of his mate's mouth, ignoring the insults spewing from the human being pulled from the back seat. Instead, he rubbed his claw along Jeremiah's jaw line as he nipped at his human's bottom lip.

Jeremiah opened to him. Grateman took advantage and thrust his tongue deep. He groaned in delight upon his first true taste of his mate. Even better, as he lapped at Jeremiah's tongue and mapped his mouth, his human fed him a groan of his own.

Grateman's cock ached, filling the pouch of his loincloth. Knowing he could do nothing about it right then, he eased the kiss to an end. He rested his forehead against Jeremiah's and just reveled in the knowledge that his mate was back with him, and of his own free will this time.

"I want you," Jeremiah whispered. "I want you so damn bad that I'm about to burst with it. Fuck!"

Grinning, Grateman lifted his head. "Then you will have me," he vowed. "I will take you to my room, lay you down, and ride your cock. All you'll have to do is lay there and enjoy."

Jeremiah's eyes dilated and he moaned as he pressed the heel of one hand to his sweatpants-covered groin. "God, yes," he whispered. "But first, I need to talk to Maelgwn. I need to tell him, warn him, that an attack is coming."

Growling softly, Grateman jerked a nod. "Right. Can you walk?"

"Yeah," Jeremiah stated. "With a little help."

When Grateman turned around, he found Golren not far away. He was staring at the front door, a troubled look on his face. Before the pair could get far, Golren fell into step beside him, opening the doors for them.

"Is Quinn your friend?" Golren asked.

Jeremiah shrugged. "I'd call him more like an acquaintance," he admitted. "I always thought he was a good guy, though. Is he really Taolma's mate?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Damn," Grateman rumbled. That would be a tough mating, and he'd always thought Taolma was such a good kid.

"He joined the hunters after his wife and little boy were found killed," Jeremiah murmured. His voice sounded a little tired, but he continued by saying, "Their bodies had been drained of blood and there were puncture marks on their necks."

"Vampires?" Golren asked.

Jeremiah nodded. "Yeah, that's what he claims, although how he figured it out I never asked." He sighed, leaning more of his weight on Grateman, seeming to enjoy his arms around him. "I don't think Quinn is a bad man," he told him. "I just thing he's... heartbroken."

"I will tell Taolma of this," Golren stated. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"I wish him luck," Jeremiah stated. "If there is anything I can do to help, just ask. I would like to see Quinn happy."

"Thank you again," Golren stated.

"No, thank you," Jeremiah said. "All of you. I owe you."

"Just keep everyone safe," Golren responded. "That's thanks enough."

"I'll do my best," Jeremiah replied.

Golren nodded, then peeled away, heading down another hallway.

Grateman stopped before his chieftain's study and knocked. "This is Maelgwn's study," he told his mate. "He overheard most of your conversation, so hopefully it won't take you long to share whatever else you want to share." He waggled his brows as he told his mate, "Then I'm going to show you my quarters... the suite of rooms we will share together... if you're willing."

"Hell, yeah," Jeremiah murmured. "That sounds fucking fantastic."

"Most definitely fucking," Grateman rumbled, lowering his head and pressing a kiss to Jeremiah's lips. He'd just begun sliding his tongue into his mate's mouth when someone cleared his throat. Lifting his head, breaking the kiss, he spotted Tobias leaning in the doorway, an amused expression on his face. "Right," Grateman muttered. "Let's get this over with."

"We'll try not to keep you from your fuckfest for too long," Tobias teased.

"I'm sure we can get whatever information we need to keep our hatchlings and cubs safe without taking too much of your time."

"Oh, shit," Jeremiah whispered. "Now he hates me."

Grateman shook his head. "No he doesn't," he assured. "Believe it or not, that was his version of teasing." As Grateman spoke, he helped Jeremiah into the room. "But I do feel like an ass for being selfish, but with you in my arms, and not being bonded, yet, it's damn difficult to concentrate on anything else."

Jeremiah just nodded, his scent suddenly giving off a hint of uncertainty. Grateman wasn't certain if it was due to the prospect of sex with him. The other possibility was that the room was full of gargoyles. Just about every enforcer and tracker in the clutch was standing around Maelgwn's study. The obvious one missing was Vane, since his mate had just finished giving birth to their egg. He bet Matthew would be sleeping for hours after five hours in labor.

Easing onto a love seat, Grateman helped Jeremiah sit next to him. He curled his arm around him, holding him close. Maelgwn settled on one of the chairs, his mate curled up on his lap. Einan and Sapian shared the other love seat, dwarfing the piece of furniture. Tobias took the final chair.

"Holy shit."

Hearing Jeremiah's softly-hissed words, Grateman focused on his lover. His mate was staring open-mouthed at Maelgwn, or more to the point, Maelgwn's mate, Bobby. The small human smirked, his left hand resting protectively on his slightly distended stomach.

"Jeremiah," Grateman said, interrupting the staring contest. "This is Bobby Truman. He is Maelgwn's mate. They've been together a couple of years, now."

Bobby lifted his right hand, waving. "Hi. Welcome to the clutch."

"Nice to meet you," Jeremiah responded, probably more due to ingrained habit than anything else. He followed that up by whispering, "You're pregnant."

"I am," Bobby continued. "Eight weeks now. I'm due in another four."

Jeremiah gaped for a few seconds, then snapped his jaw shut before asking, "And you're okay with that? This is your choice?"

Maelgwn's eyes narrowed and a low growl rumbled through him. Bobby chuckled and patted his chest. "Down, big guy. Surely you can understand his concern."

"I don't like what he's insinuating," Maelgwn grumbled.

Bobby chuckled. "He's not insinuating anything other than being confused. You remember how long it took me to accept that I'd be the one carrying our child?" he pointed out. He caressed his belly. "This is not normal for humans. We take a little... time to get our mind around it." As he patted Maelgwn's chest again, he smiled at Jeremiah. "This is *him* doing that, that's all."

"Right," Maelgwn grumbled. "Sorry."

Upon seeing Jeremiah's wide eyes and gaping mouth, Grateman didn't know whether to laugh or kiss him. He did neither, considering the situation. Instead, he reached over and gently closed his human's mouth.

"So," Grateman rumbled. "What do we need to know about this upcoming attack?"

Jeremiah cleared his throat, his neck showing a hint of red. "Well, according to Paris, we would have to attack during the day," he stated. "Because some of the demons can't tolerate daylight and will be sleeping."

Grateman grimaced. That was sort-of true.

Maelgwn turned and eyed Einan. "Make certain everyone knows to roost on the parapets and behind something. No one should be sleeping in any place that's easily accessible or out in the open."

"Got it," Einan responded.

When Maelgwn returned his focus to Jeremiah, Grateman watched his mate glance his way, as if seeking reassurance. He gently scraped his claws along the tendon in the man's neck. Licking his lips, he envisioned sinking his canines into his flesh. His cock twitched at the thought.

"You with us, Grateman?"

Upon hearing Sapian's amused comment, Grateman glanced around the group. He'd definitely missed something, judging by the stony expression on most of the gargoyle's faces. Not to mention, Jeremiah sat with hunched shoulders.

"Uh, guess not," Grateman admitted. "What'd I miss?"

"Evidently, Jeremiah thinks Quinn told the hunters the location of the infirmary and that a human just laid an egg today," Tobias growled. "That's where they're going to be focused."

"Damn," Grateman rumbled. "They go after Vane's egg and there's going to be a whole lot of dead hunters littering our grounds."

"Exactly," Maelgwn responded, expressing his displeasure in that one word. "Anyone who goes after eggs is dead." After that declaration, he turned to Tobias, "Spread the word. If a mate or hatchling is threatened, deadly force should be used."

"Will do," the second snarled. "And we should increase eyes in the security room."

"And put up more cameras," Grateman added. "We have gaps." Before the attack on the hunter's warehouse, he'd been working with Raymond to establish placement. "How many extra do we have?" Grateman directed that question at Einan. He knew the enforcer handled ordering and inventory of most of the electronic equipment.

Einan rubbed his jaw, his eyes narrowing. "Only three, but if they don't attack within the next thirty-six hours, then we might get the shipment of a dozen. I ordered it last week and it's due day after tomorrow."

"Good," Maelgwn rumbled. "No one patrols alone and increase frequency." He rubbed Bobby's arm as he growled, "We'll be ready for them." Then, Maelgwn focused on Jeremiah. "Thank you for the information. Now you should go get some rest."

Grateman knew a dismissal when he heard one. He figured the others would spend the next hour assigning whoever to the patrol schedule and sending pairs out to set up new cameras. He also knew they didn't yet trust Jeremiah and didn't want to voice specifics until he was gone... especially since in times like this, the hatchlings would be hidden in a massive recreational room in the basement that was fireproof and bulletproof. Guards would be assigned inside and out.

"Let's go," Grateman murmured, helping Jeremiah to his feet. "We have unfinished business, my mate."

That comment drew a couple of chuckles, breaking the seriousness of the mood in the room. It also caused Jeremiah to flush. Grateman loved that pink hue on his skin. He wanted to put it on there for a whole other reason.

"Have fun!" Sapian called, drawing a few chuckles from some of the others.

Grateman snorted, closing the door behind him. "Just ignore him," he urged.

"Does everyone think we're headed to your rooms to have sex?" Jeremiah grumbled.

Grinning, Grateman winked at his mate. "We are, though? Aren't we?" Jeremiah's face turned beet red. "Y-Yeah."

"I made you a promise, my mate," Grateman crooned, helping Jeremiah walk down the hall, leaving the chieftain's wing of the estate. "I'm going to show you how good it feels for me to ride your cock."

Groaning, Jeremiah used the hand he didn't have around Grateman's waist to press against his sweatpants-covered erection. "You all are so damn open about it," he whispered. "Is that normal?"

Grateman nodded. "I suppose we are. We understand the need for sex, the need to be intimate with our mate." He pressed a quick kiss to Jeremiah's temple, not breaking his stride. "You are my mate. I want to touch you, soothe you, and care for you. Seeing you hurt is like a knife to my gut. I hate seeing you struggle," he admitted. "I want you well, and I know sharing my blood with you will assist. Now that you're ready to accept that, I want to get to it as soon as possible."

Chuckling wryly, Grateman added, "And I'm struggling with a case of blue

balls."

Jeremiah's brows shot up. "Right. You got me off the other day and got nothing out of it. Shit. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Grateman replied. "I don't mind." He waggled his brow ridges at his mate as he stopped outside the door to his suite of rooms. "Besides, now we're going to fix that with several spectacular orgasms."

"Several?" Jeremiah gasped, clearly disbelieving.

Grateman nodded. "Oh, yes."

Opening the door to his suite, Grateman helped Jeremiah inside. He closed the door behind them, then urged Jeremiah forward again. "All the suites for those without hatchlings are pretty similar," he explained. "Front living space, small kitchenette, and breakfast nook. Then a large bedroom and bathroom." He pointed as he talked, letting his mate know where everything was, ending by leading Jeremiah into the bedroom.

"What do you guys need a bed for, if you turn to stone to sleep?"

Grateman barked a laugh. "Just because we turn to stone while we sleep doesn't mean we don't like soft things while in this form." He winked, then added, "Besides. Once we find our mates, we enjoy holding them just as much as the next paranormal."

Jeremiah nodded quickly. "Right. Sure. I didn't mean—"

Ceasing his mate's ramblings with a kiss, Grateman wrapped both his arms around his waist. He thrust his tongue deep and plundered his mouth as he slid one hand down to his human's ass. Jeremiah's firm mound felt amazing in his hand and he couldn't help but squeeze the globe he cradled.

Once Jeremiah leaned against him, becoming pliant in his arms, Grateman lifted him. His mate slid his arms up and wrapped them around his neck. Never stopping the kiss, Grateman plundered him as he carried Jeremiah to the bed.

Grateman eased Jeremiah onto the soft mattress, ending the kiss. He gripped the waistband of his mate's sweats, then paused. Grimacing, he did something he should have done first thing.

"Are you feeling up to this, Jeremiah?" Grateman asked, doing his best to ignore his throbbing cock. "If you need more time or you need one of the docs to look at your wounds, we can wait."

Jeremiah glared up at him. "Oh, hell no," he snapped. He grabbed the base of his t-shirt and with a wiggle and twist, managed to get it out from under himself and over his head. He tossed it off the side of the bed, then pointed at his sweats. "Take these off me, Grateman. You promised to ride my dick."

Grateman's shaft twitched and he groaned. "Hell, yeah," he whispered, doing as his mate commanded.

Lifting the fabric away from Jeremiah's erection, Grateman freed his lover's beautiful dick. He spotted the beads of nearly translucent fluid beading from his mate's slit and licked his lips. Remembering what that had tasted like, he wanted to enjoy the sweet flavor again.

Quickly divesting Jeremiah of his sweats, Grateman tossed them on the floor with one hand. He reached over with the other and grabbed the tube of lube from his nightstand. Seconds later, he pushed Jeremiah to the middle of the mattress, climbed up beside him, and swallowed his mate's bobbing prick to the root.

Jeremiah groaned. He twisted his fingers into the comforter and bucked against Grateman's face. "Shit," he hissed. "You're too good at that."

Popping the cap off the lube, Grateman eased off Jeremiah's cock. He poured a large dollop onto his fingers as he nuzzled Jeremiah's pubes. "You want me to stop?" he crooned. Reaching behind himself, he pushed two fingers into his own hole, quickly stretching himself. At the same time, he licked along the wide vein running the length of Jeremiah's erection, ending by lashing his tongue over the red, spongy cap.

Moaning and shuddering, Jeremiah's hips thrust. His body instinctively searched for more friction even as he muttered, "Fuck, no, I don't want you to stop, but you should." Heaving a breath, he released the comforter and grabbed onto Grateman's horns, forcing him to look up at him. "I'm going to come in about fifteen seconds, either way," he panted. "So if you want to ride me, you'd better get to it."

Grateman shuddered, a combination of delight upon feeling Jeremiah's hands on his horns and pride at hearing the need in his mate's voice.

"Hell, yeah."

Chapter Ten

His heart pounding in his chest, Jeremiah watched Grateman pull his fingers out from behind him and crawl closer. Gaping, Jeremiah peered at the shiny slick coating his fingers. The big gargoyle grinned widely, showing off his sharp teeth as he reached down and wrapped those fingers around Jeremiah's shaft. He groaned as Grateman's calloused fingers slid easily up and down his erection.

"It's lubricant," Grateman rumbled. "Always use plenty of lube when fucking," he advised. "It eases the way, making it more pleasurable for both of us."

Jeremiah jerked a nod. "Lube. Right." He'd used it plenty for jacking off, so knew how it helped soothe the way. Jeremiah would have said more, but then Grateman levered over his hips, held his dick steady, and sat down on him.

Sucking in a harsh breath, Jeremiah felt the pressure against his head. It suddenly gave way, the gargoyle's passage opening to his invasion. The tightest, hottest tunnel he'd ever experienced swallowed him.

Grateman didn't stop though. He sank down, and down, until Jeremiah's entire shaft was engulfed in rippling pressure. The gargoyle's ass rested against his thighs, and finally he paused.

Jeremiah gritted his teeth, searching for self-control. He latched onto Grateman's thighs, desperate for something to balance him. His cock throbbed almost painfully, hidden inside the gargoyle's body.

Groaning, Jeremiah shuddered. He wanted to buck, to push Grateman up a few inches, but he didn't have the strength. Still, he needed the gargoyle to move.

"Easy, Jeremiah," Grateman rumbled. He moved his hands to Jeremiah's stomach. "Just relax a moment." One hand felt a little slick, the other dry, but the fingers of both rubbed over his scars.

That caught Jeremiah's attention. He blinked, glancing from Grateman's hands to his face. There was no disgust there, no revulsion, only... admiration. It was almost as if Grateman enjoyed touching his scars.

At least the pause eased Jeremiah's burning need to come.

"What are you doing?" Jeremiah whispered. "How can you be comfortable touching those?"

Jeremiah knew what they represented. His time hunting paranormals. Grateman should hate them. Instead, he acted as if he relished gliding his fingers over the puckered skin.

"Admiring your strength of will," Grateman rumbled. "Your perseverance." He lifted his gaze from where he touched and focused on Jeremiah's face. At the same time, he skimmed his fingertips up his chest to grip his nipples. As he tweaked the bars embedded in them, he roughly added, "And I love this little enjoyment of pain, you have."

Feeling Grateman twist the bars in his nipples, stinging fire erupted across his chest. The burn caused goose bumps to break out on his skin. His abs clenched with the painful pleasure and tingles traveled down his treasure trail to center in his groin.

When Grateman turned the bars the other way, Jeremiah felt his cock flex where it was embedded in the gargoyle. Sweat broke out on his skin as his balls tightened. Pre-cum oozed from his shaft and into Grateman's channel.

"Oh, God!" Jeremiah cried. "Please!"

"More?" Grateman asked, scraping his claws around and around his nipples. "Or perhaps it is this you crave?" Lifting up slowly, he rose off Jeremiah's groin. As he did so, he tightened his channel muscles, milking him. "Or maybe this." Grateman lowered ever-so-slowly back down again.

"Yes," Jeremiah pleaded. "All of it. All of it feels so fucking good! More!"

Never had he felt the like of being buried balls deep in the gargoyle. He wanted to pound into the creature. To feel his channel ripple along his shaft, to milk him and squeeze him, to hear his lover cry out his own pleasure.

"Anything you want, my mate," Grateman growled, speeding up his movements. "One day, I will tie you to my bed, sink my cock deep inside you, and play with your nipples until you come," he vowed. "I bet I could do it, too," he continued, his voice turning to a rough growl as his hips began moving faster. "Couldn't I, Jeremiah?"

"Oh, fuck!" Jeremiah cried, feeling the tingle at the base of his spine, heralding his impending orgasm.

"That's what we're doing, mate," Grateman rumbled. "Fucking."

Hearing that, Jeremiah ceased his attempts to thrust. He released his hold on one of Grateman's thighs and grabbed the gargoyle's massive rod. Feeling another male's erection for the first time, he gave it a tentative stroke.

Even with his touch so light, Grateman still froze his hips. A shudder worked through his big body. His wings lifted from his shoulders, billowing behind him as he arched into Jeremiah's hold. A ripple went through his chute muscles, giving his erection a massage.

"Sit on my lap," Jeremiah ordered as he continued to jack the thick black cock. "Let me get you off first," he whispered. "Let me prove this isn't just fucking. Not to me."

Jeremiah understood there was no going back from this. As he learned the heft and girth of his gargoyle lover, watched and felt him sink down again, accepting Jeremiah's erection deep inside his body, he knew he never wanted to. The connection he felt with his gargoyle, he'd never felt it with anyone and knew he never would again.

"You are mine, Grateman," Jeremiah claimed. "Just as I am yours. This might be fucking now, but it will not always be."

Even now, Jeremiah knew he was coming to care for the gargoyle. Otherwise, he never would have returned. Jeremiah knew it was so damn worth it.

"Mine," Grateman rumbled. "Yes, you are mine."

"Show me," Jeremiah urged, tightening his fist further. He reveled upon seeing the stark pleasure etched across his almost alien features. "You're beautiful in your pleasure," he whispered. "I want to see it. Show me everything."

Jeremiah sped up his strokes. He massaged the wrinkled flesh under the head and, after pushing the foreskin all the way back, scraped his thumbnail across the head. He did everything he liked done to his own cock, all the while doing his best to ignore the tightening of his own balls.

"J-Jeremiah," Grateman stuttered. "My mate."

"Your mate," Jeremiah instantly responded. At the same time, he dipped his nail into Grateman's piss-slit. His intuition paid off. His gargoyle's eyes snapped open as a moan tore from his throat. Jeremiah did it a second time as he ordered, "Come for me, mate."

Grateman let out a roar as he obeyed. Pearly-white seed burst from his head in thick, ropy spurts. The warm cum landed on Jeremiah's chest, stomach, and hand.

Jeremiah continued working him, reveling in the pained expression on the gargoyle's face. *Stunning!* Unable to hold off his own pleasure any longer, he let go. His orgasm instantly swamped him and his balls unloaded, flooding Grateman's channel with his cum.

"Yesss," Grateman rumbled, clearly pleased. "So good."

When Jeremiah had enough sense in his brain to untangle his tongue, he grinned and muttered, "Shouldn't that be my line?"

Grateman hummed, his eyes narrowing. "Are you ready for your second orgasm?"

Jeremiah felt his shaft softening and shook his head. "Gonna need a few minutes first, lover."

"No, you won't."

Before Jeremiah could utter another warning, Grateman leaned down, opened

his mouth, and latched onto his shoulder. He sank his teeth into Jeremiah's flesh, piercing his skin. Jeremiah gaped at the sudden pain, then heat unlike anything he'd felt before spread from the bite. It traveled down his chest, made his nipples burn, and his cock stiffen. True to Grateman's claim, Jeremiah felt his balls tighten once more and a second orgasm swamped his system. Moaning, Jeremiah convulsed as bliss pinged through him.

"There you go," Grateman growled, sounding so very smug. He leaned close, grinning down at him. "Told you."

Jeremiah chuckled roughly. "S-So that's the claiming bite?"

"It is."

"Does that always happen?"

Grateman lowered his head and licked at the mark on his shoulder. Tingles spread up Jeremiah's neck, making the hairs at the nape of his neck stand on end. "Yes," the gargoyle whispered. "Always."

"What about on you?" Jeremiah asked.

Without waiting for an answer, Jeremiah tilted his head and wrapped his jaw around the tendon of Grateman's neck and bit... hard. It took some doing with his blunt teeth, but he managed to break skin. He tasted the iron base, but under that... it seemed almost sweet.

Jeremiah heard Grateman's roar, the sound one of intense pleasure. More warm seed spattered across his abs, filling the space between them. The sound, smell, and feeling caused his own softening shaft to twitch where it was still encased in his lover's body.

Easing his teeth from Grateman's flesh, Jeremiah licked his lips. He swallowed down the remaining traces of his lover's blood, realizing he didn't mind the taste at all. In fact, he figured he'd be more than happy to do that again... especially with a result like that.

Relaxing back on the comforter, Jeremiah grinned up at his gargoyle. "Guess you like that," he stated, knowing he sounded smug.

Grateman chuckled roughly from where he rested his forehead on Jeremiah's shoulder. "Yeah," he murmured. "You can bite me any damn time you want."

Jeremiah chuckled. He pressed a kiss to Grateman's temple, sampling the taste of his skin. "Is that so?" he teased, unable to remember when he'd felt so relaxed or had so much fun with a sexual partner.

"Absolutely," Grateman responded, lifting his head to meet Jeremiah's next kiss. After lapping and nipping at each other's lips for a few minutes, Grateman groaned and levered up. "Do you want a bath? I want to wash you."

"What about if we are sitting in Maelgwn's office?" Jeremiah asked. "And I don't remember the last time I've actually taken a bath. I'm kind of a shower

man."

Grateman chuckled. "You're completely missing out." He eased up and off of Jeremiah's prick, pulling a hiss from Jeremiah's throat. Grinning, Grateman winked. "Don't worry. I'll let your cock in me again. Oh, and I'm going to change your mind about baths. Starting now."

Easing off the bed, Grateman slid his arms under Jeremiah's thighs and torso. Jeremiah chuckled, but he didn't fight his lover. If anyone else had tried this, he probably would have felt unmanned, but this was his gargoyle.

"And what do you mean?" Grateman asked, making his way into a massive bathroom with a huge corner jetted tub. "What's that about Maelgwn's office?"

Jeremiah winked at his lover, then answered, "I mean, you said I could bite you whenever. What if we were in Maelgwn's office? Could I bite you then?"

Grateman gaped at him. His eyes widened in obvious surprise. "What?" He grinned back as he barked a laugh. "Gods can you imagine the look on his face if that happened?" He eased Jeremiah down on the side of the tub. Running his clawed forefingers over his brow, he winked and whispered, "Maybe only if no one else is in the room and we're really, really bored."

Barking a laugh, Jeremiah nodded. "Right. Got it." He watched as Grateman leaned over and turned on the water. Sweeping his gaze over the large tub, he noted the multiple jets. "I can see the allure."

"You haven't, yet, Jeremiah," Grateman rumbled, winking at him. "But you will."

Jeremiah watched the water rise, feeling the warmth tickle his toes, then flow over them. He lifted a brow when Grateman grabbed a bottle out of the cupboard. Trying to read the bottle around the gargoyle's fingers, he only made out the word oil.

"What is that?" Jeremiah asked as Grateman screwed the cap back on and set it aside. Winking, he teased, "Bubble bath?"

Grateman chuckled, then stepped into the tub. "Even better," he told him. "It's a soothing bath oil. It'll help ease the aches from your injuries." Settling his bulk into the large tub, he reached up and pulled Jeremiah to him. Once he had him positioned with his back to Grateman's chest, seated between his thighs, Grateman whispered into his ear, "Plus, it will help ease the way as I prepare you for my taking... and our next couple of orgasms."

Jeremiah groaned, shocked to actually feel his dick responding. "How the hell is that possible?"

Grateman just chuckled. "Because I am a paranormal, and we are mates," he rumbled, pressing kisses to Jeremiah's neck. His hands skimmed over his chest, relaxing and stirring all at the same time. "We will always want to touch, to feel,

to stroke each other." Nipping Jeremiah's neck, he added, "Although once we're bonded, we will have a little more self-control."

"Self-control is overrated," Jeremiah whispered, feeling his skin tingle in response to Grateman's touches.

He reveled in the light scrape of his nails over his scars, which often transmitted so little sensation. When Grateman flicked his claws over his pierced nipples, it caused his chest to heat. The best, although odd, was the feel of Grateman's wings. The gargoyle wrapped them around both of them, and the leathery appendages scraped over his thighs and already hardening dick.

"You're so responsive," Grateman rumbled. "I love touching your skin, mapping your chest, your legs and body, and seeing what happens."

Jeremiah groaned, resting his head against Grateman's shoulder. "Yeah," he whispered. "I, uh, I like that." He sighed, allowing his eyes to close. He nuzzled his temple into Grateman's neck. "I want to be bonded with you. Does it hurt?"

When Grateman had ridden him, he had sure seemed to be enjoying himself.

"It does if it's not done correctly," Grateman warned. "Or if it's rushed." He sighed softly, blowing a warm stream along Jeremiah's neck. "And the first time can be rough if you don't know how to relax." Then he licked a stripe up Jeremiah's neck before whispering hotly, "But I will make sure you're plenty prepared and very relaxed, my mate," he vowed. "Because we will be sharing our bodies for centuries. I won't have you fearing giving your body to me whenever I wish to take you. I want you looking forward to it."

Jeremiah sighed, relaxing against his lover's chest. Oddly enough, he found it damn comforting being the smaller of the pair. He'd never had that before. Of course, he'd never had a steady lover, either.

Happy with the sudden changes, and knowing his sister would be just as damn happy for him—hell, she'd harped on him to get a life enough times—he tilted his head back and peered up at his gargoyle.

"Are you going to show me?"

Chapter Eleven

Grateman practically vibrated with need. His cock rode the cleft of Jeremiah's ass, and he wanted to do exactly as his lover asked. Still, he had to remind him of one thing.

Gently cupping Jeremiah's jaw, Grateman held his human's face steady. He pressed a light kiss to his man's lips. Smiling down at the hunter who'd come to mean everything to him, he held the man's gaze.

"If you give yourself to me now," Grateman warned. "I'll never be able to leave you... or you me." His voice deepened to a growl as he warned, "I won't let you."

Jeremiah eased from his grip. For an instant, Grateman thought he was rejecting him, especially when he rocked forward and began maneuvering around the tub. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't certain what.

To Grateman's surprise, Jeremiah pivoted on his knees, then swung a leg over. He crawled forward until he settled on Grateman's thighs, facing him. Jeremiah rested his forearms on his shoulders and cupped his neck.

"I already came back to you once," Jeremiah murmured, smirking. "And that was before we were bonded. Do you really think I won't always do everything in my power to return to you should anything happen?" Then, he scoffed. "We're in a war, Grateman," he whispered. "It's up to you to keep me from getting kidnapped again."

Grateman growled softly. "No bloody chance in hell," he snarled. "You won't be leaving my side." Realizing what he claimed and seeing Jeremiah's amused smile, he amended, "At least not for a while, anyway. Once things get back to normal around here, maybe I'll let you walk the grounds alone."

Jeremiah hummed, his eyes narrowed. "Hmm, life outside these walls. I wonder what that's like."

Grinning, Grateman murmured, "Boring. After all, there aren't massive garden mazes with lover's nooks designed for private interludes out in the real world." He winked, warming to the subject. "Or a pond with private camping spots for mates to get some time alone. Or daycare. Or a paranormal infirmary. Or even the beautiful hiking trails that have more picnic stops than, well—" He waggled his brow ridges. "I'm sure you can figure that out."

Jeremiah chuckled low in his throat. His green eyes sparkled as he shook his head. "Damn. That all sounds fantastic. I can't remember—" He stopped and sighed, his gaze lowering to Grateman's chin. "Anyway, I look forward to

exploring all that with you."

Realizing where his mate's thoughts had turned—his sister—Grateman rested one hand on his hip and the other on his jaw. "I'd love to hear about your sister some day. She must have been an extraordinary woman."

"You would?" Jeremiah sounded surprised. "Why?"

Grateman shrugged. "She was your family. You were obviously very close. If I weren't an only hatchling, I'd probably want to tell you about my family, too." "Only child?"

Nodding in response to Jeremiah's question, Grateman rubbed his hands up and down his human's back. "Yes, however, that was a hell of a long time ago. My clutch is my family now, but I don't want to talk about them, either." As he spoke, he lowered one hand to Jeremiah's hip and urged him forward, rocking his hard erection against his human's own semi-hard shaft.

Jeremiah chuckled. "Really?" he murmured, moving with Grateman's urgings. "What would you like to discuss, then?"

Grateman kept up the movement as he used his other hand to reach for the oil. He held it up. "I want to tell you how versatile this shit is."

Grinning, Jeremiah grabbed it from his hands. "Bath oil? Really?" He smirked. "And just how versatile is this stuff?"

"Open the bottle, Jeremiah," Grateman ordered gruffly. With his shaft rubbing against his human's, he could tell how excited his mate had become... plus, it was also given away by the smell. It was going straight to his head. "Pour some onto my fingers," he ordered, holding up his now-free hand, wiggling them. "All over."

Jeremiah started pouring... and kept pouring.

"Whoa," Grateman rumbled, biting back a chuckle. "That's good. I think that'll work."

Tipping the bottle back, Jeremiah snickered. "Didn't you say always use plenty of lube?" He smirked, his expression turning almost feral. "That is what you had in mind, wasn't it? You gonna open me up and stick your dick in me? Gonna fill me with your seed and seal our bond?"

Grateman groaned upon hearing those words from his human's throat. Gods above, never would he have imagined this man's confidence when he'd chased him down on a dirt bike. Now, though, all he could do was nod.

"Yes," Grateman whispered. "I thought this position would give you plenty of control, as well as not strain your healing injuries." He met his human's eyes, turning serious as he whispered, "I don't ever want to hurt you."

Jeremiah's expression sobered. He reached over and set down the bottle before returning his gaze to Grateman. A reassuring smile curved his lips as he stated,

"I know, Grateman. I know. I want the same for you, ya know."

Grateman chuckled softly. "I get it," he rumbled. "You and I will work through all our differences. I want to help you, so you don't feel like this is all one-sided."

Scoffing, Jeremiah smirked as he rocked against him. "Not one-sided. You please me, make me happier than I ever thought possible." He rolled his eyes as he shook his head. "Hell, you want to hear about my scars and the reason I tracked shifters even though we both know what I was doing was wrong."

Taking advantage of Jeremiah's distraction, Grateman lowered his slicked hand beneath the water and slipped his fingers along his human's crack. Jeremiah hissed, but he made no move as if to stop him. Grateful, Grateman rubbed over his human's hole, feeling the tight striated muscle.

Deciding to be honest, Grateman told him, "Yes, I think what Roger and his people are doing is wrong. I don't know what part you had in that and frankly I don't care beyond learning how to help those who were affected." He pried apart his lover's cheeks and pushed in one digit up to his knuckle as he continued. "While I don't know what shifters you tracked before your time with them." He held Jeremiah's gaze as he pushed deeper, watching as his human's eyes widened, Grateman buried his finger. "I know what you did was from a good place. You wanted to help humans against what you considered crazed creatures."

Crooking his finger, Grateman knew he'd found it. Jeremiah gaped and gasped. The muscles of his channel rippled around his finger, making his cock twitch. He wanted inside that tight hot space so damn badly.

Jeremiah groaned, his voice echoing off the bathroom walls. Refocusing on his sexy human, Grateman eased his finger out, pushed back in to rub over his prostate again. Once more, he watched that blissful expression creep over his face as his pleased cry filled the warm room.

The next time Grateman pulled out his finger, he pushed two back into him. He rested the tip of his longer digit on Jeremiah's prostate, rubbing gently while his other finger held steady. Letting his lover assimilate the stretch, Grateman enjoyed the way his lover opened his mouth and panted.

So fucking sexy.

Grateman wanted to put that look on Jeremiah often. Tipping his head down, he wrapped his lips around one of his human's pierced buds. He tugged and sucked on his mate's piercing while fucking him with his fingers.

Jeremiah groaned and arched, pushing his chest forward, silently begging for more. The move also pushed his ass against Grateman's hand. Taking advantage, he eased a third finger into his lover's channel.

At that, Jeremiah tensed.

Stilling his fingers, Grateman continued to suckle on his nipple. "Easy," he mumbled, his voice muffled against Jeremiah's skin. "The pain will ease," he promised, massaging his mate's prostate ever so gently. "Just relax."

"It's okay," Jeremiah whispered, releasing a sigh. "I'm okay." He opened his eyes and smiled down at Grateman. "Keep going."

Taking Jeremiah at his word, Grateman eased his fingers out, then back in again. Upon hearing his lover moan once more, he smiled against his skin. He released Jeremiah's nipple and began kissing his way up his chest. Spotting his bite mark, Grateman grinned, pride filling him. He wrapped his lips around the mark and sucked lightly.

Jeremiah groaned and shuddered in his arms. "Oh, damn," he murmured. "Why do I want you to bite me again so damn bad?"

Grateman lifted his head and grinned at him. "Because you are my mate." He winked, then added, "And you like both the pain and the pleasure." As he spoke, he rubbed his fingers over Jeremiah's hidden gland once more.

"Shit, Grateman!"

Pleasure zinged through him upon hearing his mate cry his name. His shaft jerked and his balls tingled. More than ready to feel his mate's channel encase him, he eased his fingers out of his chute.

"N-No," Jeremiah whined. "I'm so close."

"Do you want to come now, mate?" Grateman offered, massaging his entrance. "Or can I slide my dick into you?"

Jeremiah met his gaze, some of the lust-glaze leaving his eyes. "Yes, I want to feel you," he admitted. "I want to grip your dick when I come. Let's do this."

Not the most romantic of offers, but it still fired Grateman's blood. He moved his hands to Jeremiah's hips and adjusted his position slightly so he could align his dick's head with Jeremiah's entrance. Instantly, he felt the muscle clamp closed.

"Relax and push out," Grateman ordered, moving one hand to Jeremiah's neck, cupping his nape. "Let me in."

With one hand on Jeremiah's hips, Grateman urged him downward, pressing against his entrance, waiting for his man to do as he asked. Using the hand on Jeremiah's nape, he pulled him forward into a kiss. He scraped his canines along his bottom lip, then dipped his tongue into Jeremiah's mouth, encouraging his participation.

Jeremiah hummed in obvious pleasure.

Grateman immediately felt it when Jeremiah's opening softened, then opened. His dick's head slipped past his man's guardian muscle, wrapping around his

cap. When Jeremiah's channel clamped onto his head, he tightened his grip on his hip, urging him to pause, wanting him to relax.

Breaking the kiss, Jeremiah met his gaze. He panted softly as he whispered, "No. Don't stop. I can take you."

"I don't want to hurt you," Grateman countered, but he did ease his grip on Jeremiah's hip, letting him move as he wanted. "No pain, remember?"

Jeremiah's eyes narrowed as he chuckled roughly. Heat filled his man's expression. "We both know that's not a problem for me, Grateman." Smirking, he winked as he murmured, "I like a little pain." He pushed downward, taking a bit more of Grateman's dick, then moved back up, then down. As he moved, he rumbled, "I like the scrape of your canine on my lip, or the scrape of your claws on my scars. Feels good."

Grateman grunted, his breath catching in his chest. Shuddering at the feel of his mate taking his aching prick, he watched as Jeremiah settled his ass on his lap. Panting, Grateman looked into Jeremiah's eyes, searching for some sign of discomfort. All he saw, though, was satisfaction.

"Told you," Jeremiah panted. With heavy lidded eyes and his pupils dilated, he grinned crookedly at him. "Damn, this feels weird, Grate. Not bad. Just weird."

Feeling Jeremiah flex and relax his chute muscles, Grateman struggled to resist his urge to thrust. "I can change that weird to fan-fucking-tastic."

Jeremiah snorted. Then, he eased partway off Grateman's dick, ripping a moan from his throat. "Do it," Jeremiah urged. "I know you want to move. Take me."

Grateman jerked a nod. Gritting his teeth, he did as he'd been told. He planted his feet against the walls of the tub, then began rocking up. Ignoring the splash of the water, he thrust swiftly, sinking into his man. Grateman adjusted his angle until he heard Jeremiah gasp, then groan.

Throwing his head back, Jeremiah growled. "Hell, yeah. Right there."

Grinning ferally, Grateman pounded into his lover. He made certain to hit that same spot over and over. Grateman watched as a blissed-out expression settled over his mate's face. Seconds later, he felt the tightening of Jeremiah's chute muscles around his shaft and heard his mate's cry of pleasure. Following his mate over the edge, Grateman filled his man's ass with his seed.

Grateman slid his arms around Jeremiah and held him close. He pressed a kiss to his mate's lips. Relaxing, he enjoyed just being close to his man.

"You were right," Jeremiah rumbled from where he laid against him, sprawled on his lap, his chin resting on Grateman's shoulder. "Fan-fucking-tastic."

Chapter Twelve

At first, Jeremiah thought Grateman's moan was of pleasure. Was his lover getting himself off? Then, he recognized the sound as one of pain.

Jeremiah snapped his eyes open and peered around the room. Not seeing Grateman, he eased to a sitting position. Fear filled him. Had the hunters broken in already? Were they hurting his gargoyle?

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Jeremiah ignored the ache in his own body. His torso still pinged from healing injuries. Plus, his ass felt... weird. It didn't hurt so much—just felt oddly stretched. Jeremiah figured he'd get used to that... assuming he could find his lover and save him.

When Grateman's moan came again, Jeremiah realized it came from the bathroom. Worried the gargoyle might be sick, he rose and headed that way. He paused at the half-open door, seeing his big gargoyle's trembling body leaning against the sink.

"Are you all right?" Jeremiah asked. He frowned upon seeing the sheen of sweat covering the gargoyle's hide. "Should I call for the doctor? What's wrong?"

"No need for a doctor," Grateman rumbled hoarsely. He peered over his shoulder at Jeremiah, a pained smile on his square features. "The sun is rising. I'm going through molt. It's painful and—"

Grateman paused and refocused on the sink. Arching his back, he let out a low hiss that quickly turned into a moan. He threw back his head and roared.

As Jeremiah watched, Grateman's big, black wings seemed to slide into his shoulder blades, disappearing from view. He cringed upon seeing what had to be painful. Stepping forward, Jeremiah leaned against the counter next to him.

Rubbing Grateman's back, Jeremiah hoped to soothe him. "Is there anything I can do?" he murmured. "Maybe get you an aspirin? Do paranormals even have aspirin?"

Grateman sighed. "That actually feels really good," he whispered, his eyes sliding closed as he pressed into his touch. "Guess the rumors were true."

"What rumors were those?"

"That—"

Groaning, Grateman's legs buckled. He landed hard on his knees, his hands still clutching the counter's edge.

Jeremiah yanked his hand away as he watched Grateman's thick, mottled skin seem to ripple.

"Put your arms around me," Grateman hissed. He turned his head just enough to peer at him, anguish filling his deep brown eyes. "Please?"

Quickly lowering to his knees, Jeremiah did as the man requested. "I'm here," he assured. "I'm here."

Jeremiah plastered his chest to Grateman's back and wrapped his arms around him. Rubbing his hands over Grateman's wide torso, he attempted to soothe the bigger male. From the way Grateman's breathing evened, he hoped he'd succeeded, even though he could still feel the trembles racking his body.

His voice filled with pain, Grateman mumbled, "Th-The rumor was that a mate's touch soothes some of the pain when a gargoyle goes through molt." He sighed, resting his forehead against the cupboard. "It's true. So damn true."

"Feels odd," Jeremiah admitted. "Your skin is changing right underneath my fingers."

Grateman just groaned, probably because at that point, his face began to contort.

Jeremiah watched the male's jaw reshape, losing some of the square appearance it usually had, becoming more refined. The horns changed, seeming to spread, then turned into long black locks of hair. The pointed tips of his ears rounded and the skin lost the mottling.

When Jeremiah noted the way Grateman flexed his fingers, he glanced at his lover's hands. He grimaced as he watched the man's claws appear to retract. They reformed, turning into human-like fingernails.

Several long moments later, Grateman whispered, "Thank you." He peered over his shoulder, sounding tired, but his eyes were soft and his body more relaxed. "I didn't want you to have to see that. I know it's... grotesque... the first time we go through this."

"Not grotesque," Jeremiah countered. Maybe a week ago he would have agreed, but now he understood things better. "Just another difference. That's all." He rubbed over Grateman's chest some more, his hands sliding easily due to the sweat on his skin. "How do you feel? Is it complete?"

Grateman nodded. "Yes. It's done." He smirked and winked. "Am I more or less attractive this way?"

Jeremiah took in Grateman's deep brown skin, broad shoulders, and well-muscled limbs. His hair was still black, though he did have two longer swatches created by his horns, which was interesting. Sliding a hand up, he tucked one of the thick strands behind his ear.

That's when Jeremiah saw the shuttered look in Grateman's eyes. He realized with shock that his lover was actually worried. Did the gargoyle think he hadn't liked how he'd looked before?

"You're stunning in both forms," Jeremiah murmured, knowing it was the truth. He hoped he could convince the man of that. "Come on, handsome," he rumbled. "You're soaked in sweat. Will you let me wash you?"

Jeremiah stood, resting a hand under Grateman's upper arm. Helping him to his feet, he smiled at his lover. He enjoyed the feeling of taking care of his mate for once.

"What about your chest?" Grateman asked softly, touching his pierced nipple. "You okay?"

Nodding, Jeremiah reached into the large shower and turned on the water. "How does being in human form work, anyway?" he asked curiously. "Do you have complete control? Can you go back and forth at will?" He paused and scowled at Grateman. "It doesn't always hurt like that does it? Cosmo didn't seem in pain when he changed in front of me." Now that Jeremiah thought about it, he appreciated that the gargoyle had done it. It had prepared him for seeing the oddness of Grateman changing for the first time.

"I can change back and forth at will," Grateman responded, not fighting Jeremiah as he pulled him into the large tile-covered shower and urged him under the spray. "It's like a muscle though, so I'll have to practice so I don't change unwittingly," he admitted. Rolling a shoulder in a half-shrug, he explained, "I've been told getting angry or aroused can make it difficult to stay in human form, so I have to practice."

"Huh," Jeremiah murmured, grabbing the shampoo and pouring some onto his fingers. He reached up and began massaging it into Grateman's hair. "I really love these extra-long pieces formed by your horns," he admitted. Upon seeing Grateman's surprised look, he chuckled. "It's exotic."

"Is that a good thing?"

Jeremiah nodded. While Grateman rinsed his hair, he worked on washing his own. "Surely you must know how hot you look... in both forms," he amended, not wanting the gargoyle to get the wrong idea.

Grateman chuckled softly. "Gargoyles don't recognize aesthetics as humans do," he revealed. "We recognize our mate by scent. While we don't really give a shit what our mate looks like, beyond them being healthy, we do know that humans do value appearance. As a paranormal, we want to please our mate."

"You do a fantastic job of that," Jeremiah assured, picking up the loofah. "And this?" he teased. "Is this another way to please me?"

"Never used a loofah?" Grateman asked, turning to lean his back against the tiled wall. He reached for another bottle on the shelf. Opening the cap, he stated, "Let me show you exactly how much pleasure it can be."

Jeremiah handed the item over, then watched Grateman pour body wash on it.

A few minutes later, when Grateman rubbed the slightly scratchy surface over his nipples, his cock thickened. When the gargoyle lowered the soapy loofah to his genitals, he spilled embarrassingly fast.

Humming with pleasure, Jeremiah was more than happy to return the favor. He lowered to his knees and pressed a kiss to first one of his lover's thighs, then the other. Staring at Grateman's erection, he paused.

"You don't have to," Grateman rumbled.

"Just never been this close to another erection before," Jeremiah admitted even as he reached out and took his lover's shaft in hand. He peered up at Grateman's face as he admitted, "But I want to." He felt his face heat. "I want to learn, but what if I suck?"

Grateman chuckled. "Sucking is the idea."

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I do," Grateman rumbled. "Just think about what you like," he advised. "Keep your hand around the base of my shaft so you don't choke and just take what you can." Then, he winked. "Just watch the teeth. While I don't mind a hint of pain, no one wants too much of that on their dick."

Jeremiah nodded. "Got it."

Taking that advice to heart, Jeremiah opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around the head. He licked over the cap, analyzing the taste. The flavor had an interesting muskiness, but he knew he could learn to like it... probably a lot, too.

Sucking lightly, Jeremiah remembered Grateman's advice. He kept his one hand on the erection's base, jacking it slowly. With his other hand, he reached down and cradled his gargoyle's balls.

"Of shit, Jer," Grateman murmured. "You're a natural. You have no idea how sexy you look right now."

Jeremiah hummed, knowing how much he liked vibration on his cock. He bobbed up and down, taking in as much as he could. Licking along the vein he knew ran along the base, he rubbed the tip of his tongue against the wrinkled skin under the flared head. When he used his tongue to play with Grateman's foreskin, the gargoyle growled.

"Gonna come, my mate," Grateman warned. "Pull off if you don't want a mouthful."

Pausing in his ministrations for an instant, Jeremiah thought about that. He decided swiftly that he wanted to try it at least. Sucking harder, he rolled his lover's balls with his fingertips. He felt them pull flush to the gargoyle's groin seconds later.

Of course, the idea and the reality were two very different things. When Grateman roared and shot his first string of seed into Jeremiah's mouth, he

gagged. Jerking backward, he had just enough presence of mind to keep from scraping his teeth along his lover's shaft.

Sputtering, Jeremiah struggled to catch his breath. He remembered a second later to keep his hand moving and began jacking his lover's prick. Several more bursts of seed spurted from the gargoyle's shaft, coating his hand, neck, and chest.

Grateman heaved a sigh as he grabbed Jeremiah's shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Cupping his jaw, he captured Jeremiah's lips. Jeremiah opened to him instantly, only too happy to accept the other man's tongue.

Lapping at Grateman's appendage for a few seconds, Jeremiah did a little mapping of his own. He teased his lover's tongue into his mouth, always surprised to be reminded that it was longer and more slender than his own. Suckling the muscle, he groaned in pleasure.

When Grateman broke the kiss, he grinned down at him. "Thank you, my mate." He rubbed one hand up and down Jeremiah's back, tracing the knobs of his spine soothingly. "You are amazing."

Jeremiah chuckled and shook his head. "I don't know about that, but I'll get better with practice."

"You can practice on me anytime," Grateman rumbled. "However, I think it's time to feed you."

When Jeremiah's stomach rumbled, he had to agree. "You got any eggs? I can make an omelet or something."

Grateman shook his head. "No," he countered. "I'm going to take you to the dining hall and then give you a tour of the place," he stated. "This is your home, so you should know how to get around."

"You sure it's okay for me to be out and around?" Jeremiah asked as he turned off the shower water. He opened the door and grabbed a couple of towels. Turning, he handed the second back to Grateman. "I'm a hunter, after all."

"Not anymore, Jeremiah," Grateman countered. "You are my mate, and my clutch-mates will soon come to accept that."

Rubbing himself down, Jeremiah nodded. "I hope you're right," he murmured. "I'd like to get to know your family." He scratched absently at his scars. "I don't want anything to happen to them."

Grateman took his hand, ceasing his movements. "I know, my mate," he rumbled. "They'll learn in time." He brought Jeremiah's hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles lightly. "Until then, it just gives me another excuse to keep you close."

"Do you need an excuse?"

"No, I don't."

Jeremiah grinned, liking that answer very much. As Grateman led him out of the room and gave him a clean pair of sweats and a t-shirt, he decided he wouldn't worry about anyone else. He had his gargoyle, and that was all that mattered. For now, Jeremiah would do his best to protect his new family, and the rest would come in time.

About the Author

Charlie started writing fantasy when she was eight, and after stumbling onto her first erotic romance at age nineteen, she realized her true calling. She now focuses on writing gay erotic romance, normally of the paranormal variety, with heroes of all kinds. With the help and support of her husband, Charlie finally fulfilled one of her life-long goals... move to acreage with her horses. You can often find her curled up with her laptop and a cup of tea or glass of wine, creating her next adventure. Charlie enjoys exploring the mountains of her new Oregon home on horseback, 4-wheeler, or motorcycle.

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